



# One Stop Doc Shop Live Sessions

## Week 3. Melanie Iredale



### Introduction

*(Intro music starts – cinema film reel whirring, and countdown beeps)*

Hello and welcome to One Stop Doc Shop Live, a series that celebrates and encourages diversity in non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, our guest will share their secrets on how to produce award-winning documentaries.

I'm your host Angela Clarke and this session was made possible with the support of Screen Alliance Wales, Ffilm Cymru Wales and BFI Network funding from the National Lottery.

My guest this week is Melanie Iredale, Deputy Director at **Sheffield Doc Fest**, one of the UK's premier documentary film festivals. As part of her remit, Melanie sits on the Doc Fest Programming Team, as well as co-curates the **Rhyme & Rhythm** strand.

Originally from East Yorkshire, Melanie's background is as a Film Curator and Festival Programmer. From 2009-2014, she was Director of **Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival**, where she commissioned new, award-winning moving image work that toured festivals and galleries around the world. She is also a **BIFA** voter for the Documentary Award and regularly participates in international film juries.

We talk about what Melanie looks for when selecting films for the festival programme as well as what it takes to get your projects selected for the festivals legendary **Meet Market's** one to one pitching sessions.

And last but not least, we discuss what makes a great pitching deck.

I hope you enjoy listening.....

**Angela Clarke** - But before we crack on with today's session, I wanted to ask you what was your pathway into the world of film? How did you get into the industry? What attracted you to this world?

**Melanie Iredale** - First of all, thank you for inviting me to be here. But just to start with how I got into film exhibition... So I'm just a big film fan. As a teenager, I was really, really hungry to watch everything I could get my hands on... everything my mum taped off the TV for me. And, I went to study Film Theory, but alongside Literature at university. Back then, there were very few universities doing Film Studies as a whole course without pairing it with something.

From there, alongside doing a number of bar and events jobs, I managed to get a job as an Usher at my local independent cinema in Newcastle. It's called Tyneside Cinema. It was a great job, because back then; you had to sit in the films because somebody had to be in the auditorium, while films were on 35 mm. Now, I think, it's less the case.

But as well as, kind of feeding my appetite for film, it really gave me a love and understanding for what makes audiences tick; what makes them come to the cinema; why they choose the film they come to see, and even better, kind of, how they respond to those films. Sometimes that's through conversations on the door, and sometimes it's just really watching their face and reaction as they leave. So, yeah, and then I, from there, worked in various roles like, Administrative and Box Office roles that are tied to a cinema, before landing the job of coordinating the Film Festival that ran out of Tyneside Cinema, which is called Northern Lights, which was like a Scandinavian, Baltic and UK Film Festival.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - And... while I was doing that, I was kind of freelancing on the side, just trying to build my portfolio of programming. So I was programming for another Nordic Arts Festival as well at the time, and just trying to get all the experience I could get my hands on, in terms of event coordination, production delivery. Some of that was on other film festivals... arts festivals. I worked on a food festival. It didn't really matter. It was kind of about, you know, learning skills in event production, and also just trying to get a sense of how different organisations worked and trying to learn from as many people as possible.

And, from there, I went to Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, where I was the Programmer, Curator, Commissioner, Director of the Festival, but I actually still kept freelancing, a little bit on the side, in order, again, just to build my portfolio and again just to keep working with as many different people, to learn from as many different people... as I could. That involved, doing a freelance job in fundraising for Sheffield Doc Fest. So then, when the role of Deputy Director came up, I was invited to apply. Yeah, and that's kind of...

**Angela Clarke** - And that was it.

**Melanie Iredale** – Yeah, that was it.

**Angela Clarke** - I think that's what I've learned most about this industry, is there are so many people having to juggle so many things at the same time. So you've been in that role since 2014... so can you give us a little bit of a brief description of what Sheffield Doc Fest is and what is its mantra?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, totally. So, I mean Sheffield Doc Fest has grown and changed a lot, even in the... 11 or so years that I've been involved. It is now, as of just a couple years ago, it is its own charity, and part of my role is charity management.

And, and, yeah, its mantra, if you like, is to... is to, kind of, champion documentary film as an art form, and to support, and nurture documentary filmmakers, and also to build audiences to engage with documentary film. So we do that in a number of ways, and largely through the festival, which takes place in June, although we do do, a lot of our activities year-round, also to some sort of smaller and lesser extents.

But yeah, there's kind of three component parts to the Festival. So there's the Artistic Programme, which is the film programme, and also the Arts Programme. So the Film Programme is where we create a kind of launch pad for films of all lengths, and types, from the journalistic documentary to more creative documentary. We very deliberately want to give a home to really great, rich diversity in all kinds of non-fiction, and also films that play with non-fiction, you know, kind of all of the above, we try to create space for, and importantly films of all lengths. So, yes, shorts and yes, features, but also mid-lengths, those films that don't have so many opportunities to get a platform.

And we program through a number of different strands and sections, but maybe I'll come back to that when I've kind of given a broader overview.

So our Film Programme is comprised through a mix of open submissions, which again, I'll come back to the submissions process, for sure, and also films that we have uncovered, either through going to other festivals or markets or filmmakers whose work we've profiled before or projects that we've been tracking from an earlier stage...

Then we've got our Arts Programme, which is the less linear films. It takes the form more of an exhibition.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - And we're interested... It was formerly called Alternate Reality, so anybody who was familiar with Sheffield Doc Fest, up until, a year or two ago, that might be how you remember it.

13

But yeah, so we're interested, again, in non-fiction-ish, data, research-based projects, but ones, which might be more web-based, might be performance-based, might be installation-based, might be three channels instead of one. Those kind of films which expand the boundaries of single-frame cinema, basically.

And again, that's programmed through a mix of direct research. And also, again, open submissions. And there's also a commissioning element to the Arts Programme as well, which we do very rarely in the Film Programme. So that's the Artistic Programme.

Then we've got the Industry Programme. Because, there's also our Marketplace. So the Industry Programme is more the kind of business side of things, but also talent, training and development.

14

So our Industry Team look after the Marketplace, which is, you know, the bringing together of projects, together with industry representatives or decision makers to talk about individual projects. And they also look after a large portion of the Talks Programme.

So whilst there might be some film and arts programme talks in under the, kind of, Artistic Programme where they more directly relate to filmmakers and artists that are in the programme, the Talks Programme is also comprised of panels, opportunities to meet commissioners... discussions that are around the, kind of, topics, trends, challenges in the industry.

15

And then we've got the Community Programme, which is the third part of the festival, which is, you know, more directly related to the Film and Arts Programme but is about local engagement, particularly local, though it doesn't necessarily need to be, participation in that programme. So that's kind of the festival, very broadly.

**Angela Clarke** – It's been my favourite for years and years, because I think it's always got... What I like about it is because it is so inclusive, it's got a huge array of films so you can go and there's always something for everybody. Each time I've gone, I've always gone and watched things that I would maybe never ordinarily have stumbled across, but you, kind of, think 'Oh, that sounds quite interesting'.

16

Because Sheffield's such a great city in terms of all of the different venues are all so compact, you kind of end up meeting... you meet loads of people. I've met loads of people, every year, just randomly, but that you only ever really see there but you can say like, 'Oh, hello!', and you always meet in the queues and stuff like that. I think that's what I love about it, is that there's a really good vibe and it never feels like... Because sometimes film festivals can feel a little bit pretentious and it never feels like that, I think, because it feels like it's really anchored in the community and Sheffield is a really friendly and warm place to be as well. It's just a really lovely vibe so when you're sitting in, even just, the cafes around the cinemas and The Crucible, you can hear everybody talking about films all the time, so it's got a lovely vibe to it. I also think as well, the talks that you get there

tap into that, kind of, zeitgeist and what's going on in both film and television at that time, so I think you get a lot of bang for your buck when you, sign up to it.

So if we start with the films then, if we can dissect this. So just as a ballpark thing, on average, how many films, both feature length and short make it into your programme every year?

**Melanie Iredale** – Yeah, so between 150 and 200. So the last couple of years, Covid years, have been at that, kind of, lower, more like 150-160-end, but in a “normal” year, yeah, it's been much closer to 200, and that encompasses shorts, mid-lengths and features.

And then, there's the Arts Programme projects on top of that, of which there are about 30 every year.

**Angela Clarke** - And so of that proportion then, let's say we're talking a “normal” year, and it's nearer to 200, of that, proportionally, how many of them are features and how many of them would be mid-length to shorts? Do you have a set ballpark of, ‘we'll take that amount’ or does it ebb and flow each year depending on what you get?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, they do ebb and flow. And, I mean, it's always, let's put it this way, there's always more features than otherwise.

We track the number of films overall, but we don't really track by length, and also we don't actually, technically programme by length, either. We program by strand.

**Angela Clarke** - Right, OK.

**Melanie Iredale** - And each strand can encompass films of any length. Some, they're a bit more suited to short films or mid-length, and so on, but all are, kind of, open to that, so we programme in terms of, what we're working towards. We program towards number of slots and by slot I mean as in a screening slot, so whether or not that slot is one feature, two mid-lengths, or seven shorts is completely a matter of curatorial discretion. So, yeah.

**Angela Clarke** – Then on an average year, how many submissions do you get to boil it down to, say, your 200? What would be an average intake for you guys in terms of submissions?

**Melanie Iredale** – Um... at least 2,500.

**Angela Clarke** - Wow!

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, so, yeah and that's just the kind of unsolicited submissions. That doesn't take into account the films that we're tracking, that

we've seen at other festivals, or that have come to us through, through other means.

**Angela Clarke** - That's a huge amount of films to plough through in terms of watching things, isn't it? I suppose it's always good to get a sense of, when you're on the other side of the fence applying to festivals, just to try and get a sense of the kind of magnitude of how many people are applying.

You know, you have a lot of films that are still selected, but in relative terms, it's a smaller proportion of who's trying to scramble to get into that arena, isn't it?

So, I suppose, that leads me into my next question and, it's a difficult one maybe for you to answer generally, but what are film programmers, like yourself, what are you looking for when you're starting to pull your programmes together? I know, we'll obviously come to talk about the different strands, but just generally, what are the standout things...? Are there certain qualities, are there certain things that you have as a checklist that you start to think, 'Right, I want it to have that', or what about having premieres and things like that?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - What impacts your decision? Talk us through, what would be a dream scenario for a film to tick in terms for you?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah. Okay. Yes. So, um, I guess, on a kind of more artistic, open level before criteria, as such, kind of comes into it.

I guess, you know, to some extent, we have to accept that what we're looking for, in a way, is quite subjective. We, as programmers, are looking to be excited, engaged, to discover or find out about something, you know, a story that we didn't know about; a topic that we didn't know enough; or equally, a kind of really refreshing angle on something that has actually, maybe, been quite well covered.

So, I guess it's just as with programming like more generally, we're looking for something that you feel is really succeeding in what it's trying to do. So, you know, if it's supposed to be comedic, is it? If it's a character-like story, is the character really engaging and interesting? Otherwise you don't have a character-led, a successful character-led film, you know. If it's a film where, you know, you feel that the story is of great importance; great, but also, is it well told?

I guess we're just, we're looking for a, kind of, spark of originality. We're looking for something that we feel has some kind of cinematic quality in the way that it's made. That doesn't necessarily mean that it needs to have the highest production values. It can be, you know (pauses). The way in which, you know, the film is told can be more sort of... It could be that it's got some sort of originality or something about it on a more, kind of, creative level.

13

But yeah, I guess we're looking for films, yes, that are cinematic in that they kind of demand the big screen, but also films that we feel might be good conversation starters. You know, we're not looking for films that provide all the answers, we're looking for films that raise really interesting questions or don't have all the answers like necessarily at all.

But yeah, that raise conversations, because you know Q & A's are a big part of what we do. Inviting filmmakers to come and talk to, you know, to come and meet their audiences is a big part of what we do, as is engaging press and so on. So, yeah, how can this film, like either create a conversation or further a discussion, which we feel is really important to have.

14

**Angela Clarke** - I think certainly looking at your programme in the past, there's been a whole array of everything from super, super, super experienced, multi-award-winning directors right the way through to people that this is their very first film.

That's what I like about Sheffield - it never seems like it discriminates against. It's not, it's not a festival just for people that have made it, as it were, it seems like it's always quite open and inclusive and I think that's another good side to it because what you then get is a very broad array of, somebody that's much older, mature, you know, that are well into their career, like the Nick Broomfields showing something that they've made and then someone that's coming through that's just left uni that's got a completely different perspective and take on what is a film and how you make it and how you execute it at the other end of it.

How many strands do you have in total, for the Film Programme?

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**Melanie Iredale** - Uh... six plus competitions, I think. So, yeah we programme by strand, in that, we welcome submissions, of all types. We always say that, it's not, you know, this isn't necessarily anything filmmakers or artists or those submitting works have to necessarily think about before, or to, you know nominate your film for a certain section. It is more that this, comes through, kind of, curatorial conversations but I guess it's just worth knowing that these are the kinds of sections that we are working towards and that we have certain spaces... for different things.

**Angela Clarke** - Right.

16

**Melanie Iredale** - And the idea is that it shouldn't mean that we turn down a film we really want because the idea is that the sections, between them, are broad enough to cover everything that we might want to include in the programme, but they help us to kind of group films and pair films together and create dialogues between certain films.

Also the strands exist as a marketing tool as well or more, for ease of, the audience user journey, so to help them find inroads into the programme, and

then to help them navigate paths through it, because it's really big and broad and, you know, the Film Programme is only one part of it.

So, yeah, so these are the kinds of reasons why the strands exists. So, yeah, so the biggest for this one is called Into The World. And it's... it's where the films by... In some cases, the more known or established directors, and not in all cases, but it's very much the kind of bigger, broader, very current topics from a truly global approach. And so it's, it's definitely a strand that's got quite a broad programme, but also a very broad, audience space.

Then we've got Rebellions...

**Angela Clarke** - Yep.

**Melanie Iredale** - It's a strand that, as the title suggests, is about films that are kind of challenging the status quo, the more kind of social impact films and so on; the films that are, in some way, campaigning for change. But beyond that, we're also looking for films that are challenging the status quo in the way in which they are made. So it's really important to us that, yeah, this is where we're looking at films which... which have denied convention in their very production.

It's where, for example, we see a number of films that have been made, collectively, as in, you know, as in by collectives.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - And so, so that's Rebellions. Then we've got Rhyme & Rhythm, which is where cinema meets other art forms. So, music films, dance films, films about any kind of form of art, culture, sport. They tend to be films about either, kind of, profiles of artists, or whatever kind. Or, perhaps, portraits of a particular art scene in a particular time or whatever. But those films, because, you know, I programme this section, I see a lot of these films that have a quite paint by numbers approach to it. They can be quite formulaic. So whilst that doesn't mean that we wouldn't show any films that fit into the usual rock doc or whatever kind of formula, it does mean that we are very actively searching for films that go beyond that.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - And, and then we've got Ghosts & Apparitions, which is very much as a strand, that's more geared towards those interested in artists' films. And, you know, films that really defy conventions of cinema that are more authored, more artistic, that might be really, kind of, playing with form. And might appeal to a more gallery-going audience than a cinema-going audience, in some cases.

Yeah, so that's Ghosts & Apparitions. They are our main curated strands.



**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - And then on top of that, we've introduced this year, The Northern Focus, which is a really small strand, but it's a space for us to give...other than being for filmmakers and artists who have a base in the north of England, it is otherwise really, really open in terms of what that can include. Obviously this, kind of, has a scouting element to that as part of a, you know, commitment to support regional filmmakers. And yeah, it's just this very small strand, but an important one that we started this year.

And then every year, we produce a retrospective, and the retrospective is likely themed around...(pause) Well, kind of, highly thematic, you know, as opposed to being a retrospective of a certain person's work or from a certain country. This year, it was about Black British Cinema and Screen Culture. Next year, it'll be something completely different. And the curator will also change each year, in order to be a specialist in that subject.

And then we have our competition programmes. So, we have two main competition programs, International Competition and UK Competition, which, I think, are self-explanatory.

And then we have a number of other awards that we make, but they are from across the strands, whereas the International Competition and the UK Competition are strands in and of themselves.

And then if I just touch on the premiere status... And so, yeah, so for the International Competition we require world premiere, or international premiere. So world premiere - being the first time your film screens in front of a public audience, whether online or off ever. Or international premiere - which is where the first time your film screens outside of its home country of production, where it's had its world premiere already. So that's the international competition.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - For UK Competition we demand world premiere. I should just say, for International Competition it is features only actually, but for UK Competition, it's films of any length, but world premiere.

And for the curated strands - Into The World, Rebellions, Rhyme & Rhythm and Ghosts & Apparitions, we just ask for UK premiere at minimum, but of course, have, the premiere status, is one of the things that you know, is one of many, many, many factors that comes into our consideration.

The reason why we have these premiere rules, as the bigger or more industry festivals do, is it's about diversity of content, really. It's about pushing us as programmers to not just take the films that are doing the festival rounds and already on the circuit and all programming each other's work, and then the pool

of who gets those opportunities and that platform gets, you know, smaller and smaller and smaller.

It's about forcing ourselves to lose films, you know. It's about forcing ourselves to, like, have to turn down certain films, because as much as we might like them, they've had their exposure, they've had their press, you know. They've got picked up for sales, they've had all the opportunities that they need in order to get them to the next stage. Whereas we could be reserving that slot for a film that hasn't yet had that. And because the higher the premiere status, the more we can do for that film in terms of press, because to get press reviews of any significance for a UK premiere only is obviously, like, sort of, diminishing chances. And, and also because the industry who come in a "normal" year, we have industry that come from 55-60 countries around the world. Although online has actually grown that to 70, but you know they're interested in where there are sales agents, distributors, other platforms, other festivals. They are interested in world, international, European premieres etc. So, yes of course, it's a factor but it's one of many, many, many factors.

And it's also not just about the premiere status, it's about the freshness, you know. So, yeah, so we open our submissions, for example, we open our submissions every year around the beginning of October, end of September/beginning of October through to February and then we run in June. And, yeah, we're unlikely to show a film that's premiered before that point. So, this is just one of those things when it comes to your festival strategy is that timing is really key.

**Angela Clarke** - One of the things I was going to ask you about, as well, was this year, you had the DocFest Exchange category – Beyond Our Own Eyes. So what is that one? Is that something separate again?

**Melanie Iredale** – The DocFest Exchange is part of our community programme. So it's, yeah, it's a curated programme. It's supported by Wellcome; whose interest is in science and research and also kind of planetary health, as they call it. So the Exchange programme is always, kind of, themed around... (pause) Yeah. Planetary health, climate justice, and where that intersects with the kind of human experience and matching film and arts programmes together with research from scientists and academics. This is part of our community programme, which means it's free, it's open to all...you know, it's super accessible. It has closed captions and so on, so... yeah, it forms part of that programme.

**Angela Clarke** - And in terms of, then, things like marketability, because obviously some of those strands will, as you say, some of them will attract films that are going to be slightly more obscure...

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - which then fits part of Sheffield's broader remit, anyway, doesn't it, in terms of the kind of films that it makes? How much in terms of marketability, the marketability of a film, governs what you choose, because, obviously, some slots are slightly more commercial than others? How much does that matter to you guys as a film festival?

**Melanie Iredale** - I think, if we really believe in a film and think it has great value, we, I guess, we feel like it's more our job to build the audience for it, and that's sometimes just accepting that not all films are broader-audience films and so that audiences might be limited. But that doesn't mean we wouldn't programme it.

So, and also a lot of these films, you know, they come to us before they've got a sales agent. Not all, but a lot do, and... um... definitely before they've got a UK distributor, or perhaps any distributor, so they don't... especially where they are world premieres or, super new films, they don't necessarily... I mean, some of them don't even have trailers. You barely have stills, like, you know, they're still cobbling together their marketing assets, and that's okay too. You know, where they have them, brilliant; we make use of them; where they don't yet, they don't.

**Angela Clarke** - *(laughs)*

**Melanie Iredale** - So, yeah, we kind of, I don't know... It, sort of, feels like that's more, maybe, a concern for the next stage in their life. So, yeah, we kind of... Yeah, not that it's... obviously, it's really, it's a really attractive offer if we think that a film might have a strong marketing pull, but it's absolutely not the be-all and end-all. I think what's really interesting is where films come that they've already built a, kind of, more genuine, direct community. So, you know, there are some films that kind of do this really well where through the production of the film and it's often where, you know, they may be quite niche, like maybe they've got a very particular kind of community that those films are attached to or a particular kind of niche interest and they've managed to build. It could be because they've needed to because they've crowdfunded along the way...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - ..in some form or other, but they've needed to build a community along with them, through the journey and obviously as a programmer, that's quite exciting because the idea of bringing together a more general doc fest, public audience, plus industry audience, plus this ready-made, perhaps really niche, community audience that the film has built, together in a room, that's a really exciting prospect. So, yeah, that's really nice but it works for certain films and, you know, is maybe less important to others. You know, there are filmmakers like Jeannie Finley who do this very well, and a film that I Exec Produced called **Rebel Dykes** that has done this really well, where it's, you know, it's totally built a ready-made audience well before...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - ..you know, well before they even, wrapped, let alone, finished their final cut, so... Yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - What's lovely is when you go to the festivals and you see, you see all those random people sat in the audience together at the same time. They aren't people, for any other purposes, would ever be sat in a room together at any point in time, in the dark watching something, so I was always think that's, you know, that's one of the lovely things about film festivals and especially Sheffield because it is quite community-based so it does get everybody engaged.

But that, then, kind of, leads me on to... so if that's what you're looking for in terms of the films and that's how that process works, then in terms of funding, can we talk a little bit about how the MeetMarket works? So I think I read before, you used to take up to about 90 projects a year that were in development - is it still, ballpark, around that or do you take more or less now? How does that sit?

**Melanie Iredale** - I think for the last couple years, while we've done it online, it's been just a few less, but not many less. So, yeah, it is there or thereabouts and then we've managed to maintain the figure of around 300 decision makers, so 90 projects, bringing them together with around 300 decision makers for one-to-one meetings - around 1,500 meetings that is over a couple days.

**Angela Clarke** - That's quite a lot of people packed into a room! So if somebody didn't understand the process then, and say I had a film, I had an idea and I'd shot a taster, I'd written a treatment document and I'd worked out who I thought my audience was going to be and what the film could be, but I'm short of blah amount of money, what kind of state are the applications - when they come to you in terms of - what do you get in and what are you looking for, as part of this film festival remit? What are you looking for in terms of those projects to try and pair people up? Would I say who I want to meet or would I just say this is my project and you then help me to try and find, we think blah, blah, blah might be good for this project? Can you explain how that all works, then?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, so it's an open call for submissions not too unlike the Film Programme and Arts Programme call for submissions that opens in November and closes in February. And yeah, we get projects that are at various different stages and we actively say that projects can be in development, production or post production.

So, we ask for, as you say the treatment, the teaser of up to three minutes, bios from those involved, a budget. We ask for, you know, it's kind of the same things that you would need to pull together for any other market or funding application. But the onus is really on the teaser. For us, that makes a big difference. And when I say teaser, we just mean a clip that's up to three minutes. And if it's a highly-edited, highly-polished trailer because you're further on in your project; brilliant. If you're not really, it can be... um... it can be a single interview.

You know, imagine it's like a character-led story and you think you've got your character's, like, super engaging in whatever way. And it's a single, three-minute interview that, you know, could, blow our minds. So, it can be as simple as that, or you can use, you know, stand-in footage, stand-in whatever. You know, we partner with an archive if somebody needs to make use of that in order to just create a, sort of, mood board, if you like, for the kinds of things that you might imagine might be in there, but you've not got money to shoot them yet or whatever.

So, yeah, we're looking for something, you know, we're looking for projects that... um... excite us in different ways, again with some sort of spark of... um... originality that we think look as though they might, you know, that the idea is good, again, that it opens up conversations. I think for the market that, kind of, idea of... marketability, and particularly internationally, comes into it perhaps just a little bit more so probably. Everything I've said about the Film Programmes still stands in terms of what we're looking for. But our market is very specifically a co-production market, which means that we are very specifically looking for projects which we think we, which we believe might be of interest or have the potential to be of interest to... uh... funders, to sales agents, distributors, whoever it is, outside of the country of production. In order to develop those partnerships and make those connections. So that is what we're looking for.

Um... yeah, whether or not that's universality or whether or not we think there's a particular interest in this country for that project, so... You can put in your application that you're interested, who you're interested to meet. I mean that shows that you've, maybe, done your research and you've got some ideas of who you want to meet, but that would really become a conversation, once - if - selected.

And, yeah, and then we would talk with that project, about who or what kinds of decision makers, you know, what stage they're at, what kinds of decision makers they want to meet, you know, what's, kind of, next for them.

Yeah, so each project can request certain meetings or the decision makers can also request meetings and then on top of that, because we know the projects inside out from that stage, and because, we've been talking to the decision makers throughout the year about what their priorities are and so on, we might also suggest meetings.

But the point with MeetMarket is that each party has to accept the meeting, and the decision makers have to have already seen the teaser and read the material so that when they come together, whether that's physical or online, when they come to the table, or in the Zoom Room or whatever... Yeah, they can get right into those conversations.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - So if you get 90 shortlisted every year, how many submissions do you tend to get into that pool, then? How many projects are pitched, on average? What are you're looking at? What are your odds of success of getting whittled down to one of the 90?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, it's always consistently just over the 500 mark. 500 - 550 proposals, something like that and as I say we don't always take up to 90. In the last couple years, it has been a little less than that, for reasons owing to, needing to give each project more attention.

And then, we might have, with the usual way of things, but, yeah, that's about the odds. And I'd say another thing, another whole layer of all of this with you know, with MeetMarkets is that we're looking for a range of projects that are different. We are very deliberately looking for it to include projects that are at different stages because our decision makers, each want to see projects that are at different stages, so we need to be able to serve all of them.

You know, so making sure that we've got a range of projects that are near completion, but also that are fresh, and I think with MeetMarket particularly, I guess, the less far on the project is, the more risk it comes with. You know, the less money it's already got in the project, the less that's being shot, etc... the more risk there is.

And that doesn't mean that we're not prepared to take that risk, but it does mean that I think either we think the ideas have to be really strong, or the team have to be really strong. You know, so either show a great track record, the team that's coming together or it needs to be stand out. You know, in order to kind of balance that risk. And that's not just, kind of, because that risk is not really ours, it's more the fact that, we wouldn't be doing our jobs if we let a project into the market that decision makers weren't prepared to take a meeting with because it's too early, and it doesn't stand out for them enough in whatever way.

But yeah, then I was going to say, there's a sort of layer to all of this whereas, in terms of balance. So, you know, we kind of, we have what we're looking for in that, kind of, very instinctive way that as I say we have to accept is subjective to some level but then when I say subjective, you know, it's never the case that only one person watches a film for the Film Programme, or one person watches a project for MeetMarket. You know, we have teams. And then, as I say, we're looking for, in the Film Programme, we're looking at the strands, play a factor, the premiere status and the freshness play a factor. In the MeetMarket, you know, what stage they're at all plays a factor.

But then diversity and balance, play a really big part and this is, kind of, where you've got all these things that are, kind of, in the air, all these things that are, kind of, possibilities.

13

But we have to think about geographical diversity. And so, yes, for the Marketplace, for example, while that's been funded by Creative Europe, then that geographical diversity plays a factor in terms of how much of it has to be European and so on.

And for the Film Programme, we've tried to be truly global. So, you know, do we have every continent represented?

And, yeah, and then we're also thinking about the diversity of the filmmakers and artists behind those projects, with regard to age, experience, you know, a good mix of new, emerging and established, you know, all gender mix. You know, and looking at the kind of nuance around the lived experience of the filmmaker in relation to the subjects.

14

Yeah, and there's so many different ways in which you have to think about diversity and, kind of, getting a balance between different tones, between parts of the world, yeah. And that's why, you know, we sometimes lose films that you wish you didn't have to, but getting that broad range, and that diversity is essential.

**Angela Clarke** - What are the biggest pitfalls that people like myself or other filmmakers have made when they're pitching something? Is there something you see and think, 'I wish people would realise that they need to include this or don't put this in'? Is there something that you see over and over as filmmakers that we do that you, as a programmer, think 'I don't need that information'?

**Melanie Iredale** - I think probably the biggest thing is, I cannot stress enough how important it is to research different festivals' programming tastes.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - You know, in order to kind of strategise and work out which A-list festivals you're aiming for and know the deadlines, and then your B-list festivals and know the deadlines and then your C-list festivals and know the deadlines.

15

And assuming that you don't have a big pot of money where you can just, like, spitfire it to all of the different festivals. I just can't stress enough how much you need to do your research on... Every festival is like so distinctive. I could tell you exactly how I feel about our programming versus our competitors, you know, international documentary festivals, for example. And there's no shortcut, really, to doing that other than to look at their last programme and to get a sense and a feel for whether or not you think that your film might be, somehow, to their tastes or whatever.

16

And, you know, I get a lot of emails that are sort of like, 'My film is about this. Here is the link to the film. Tell me whether or not you think Doc Fest will be interested'. And I, you know, I can only point you to the call for submissions, I

can't watch your film and then tell you whether or not, because I've done the work to watch the film.

I always respond saying like, 'Well, no one knows your film better than you do. And to know our programme, you only have to look at the last one'. And so, yeah, I just can't stress that enough. Each festival is very different and so alongside when you're doing the research on deadlines and on what premiere status they accept, because all that's very openly there in the guidelines, is to look at their sensibilities, and their interests, and their strands, to get to know those and get a sense of basically which ones to spend time and energy and money on, because otherwise it's just a waste.

And I'd say a shortcut to doing that is to always look at your comparables, so find films that you think, you know, a range of films that you think for whatever reason, be it subject or character or budget or tone or sensibility or whatever, that you think have some similarity to yours. And that you think that similarity is within the realms of, you know, realistic budget comparability or whatever read their credits, because that tells you who exec'd it; it tells you where they got all their funding from; it tells you what markets and labs they did; it tells you everything you need to know in the credits; and then track what festivals they went to and track what press it got and it's just a shortcut to thinking, 'Well that film went from that festival to that festival to that festival to that online, to that telly broadcast'. If you get a range of those, then you've got a good number of paths there to follow as an idea, and within it, your festival strategy.

**Angela Clarke** - No, for sure and I think that's one of the things that I think a lot of filmmakers grossly underestimate – how long that takes, how time-consuming that process is, because it is.

**Melanie Iredale** – It is.

**Angela Clarke** - But it is also hugely necessary if you want your film to be any sort of success and reach an audience beyond the immediate set of people that you've got in your life that can see it or the people that have crowdfunded it or, whatever else. And also not just leave it to the last minute, start to think about that strategy from the beginning. I think that's what I learned in retrospect as I started doing it half way through mine.

So I think Sheffield has a couple of what I call, open pitches. Can you give us a brief headline in terms of, if you were looking for money, what are those key pitches involved, because there's only a few of them, I think, as it stands, isn't it?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah, the only thing is that they change a little every year. Each year, we have between like five and eight pitches, which is where we've partnered with a very specific brand or organisation or charity, who are essentially looking to commission something. To some extent, commission/acquire something.



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And usually we're quite specific. We partner with them to do an open call for proposals for a project that meets that brief. And we usually select, it depends on the pitch, but usually five.

**Angela Clarke** - Mm-hm.

**Melanie Iredale** - And the number of proposals varies greatly depending on which one it is. And then those five projects pitch in front of a panel live, either in Sheffield, or online now. And that usually includes somebody from that organisation together with a number of decision makers that we've brought together.

So one that we've done every year is the Channel 4 First Cut pitch.

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**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Melanie Iredale** - Which is for a first feature. And another one that we do every year is the Whickers Award, which is a really nice £80,000 prize for the winner.

And then the others vary, so we've done them with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that were looking for films that were centred around poverty. We've done ones with The Guardian. So, yeah, I would just say, to check the website, or go on e-news. They tend to, those opportunities, tend to come around each spring to pitch at the festival.

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Some are broader. Some are very much looking for new talent, some might be looking for something quite specific in terms of the themes, so it really depends on what's on your plate. I really have to say that some of them, you know, some of them are awards for a few grand, some are for a lot more than that, but some come with some kind of partnership or an opportunity to platform the film. Channel 4, The Guardian, whatever, you know, Boiler Room - we've done different ones. So it can help to build an audience as well. Also, you know, whether you win or not, it's also about getting feedback from the juries and practise and a little training, in some cases, as well around pitching.

16  
**Angela Clarke** - I've always found them to be hugely valuable sessions to sit in on, because you get to see somebody selling their film, and then sharing what information they think a panel, or an objective bunch of people, need to know and then having the objective bunch of people feeding back. It's those bits of information that fall between what you think you need to tell somebody and then the assumptions that you've made within that and then the people at the other side trying to fill in those gaps and trying to work out that it needs to be a sellable proposition or it needs to be this or it needs to be that. I think they're always useful sessions to watch as well.

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - Because that whole pitching process is... A big part of being a filmmaker is as much about whether you can sell your idea to somebody, you translate it and make it something that somebody's going to want to watch and engage with. I think whether you love it or whether you don't, it's a necessary evil, isn't it? You've got to, kind of, embrace it and get on board and find a way to work that because, sadly, nobody comes round and gives you plates of money for your film.

Thank you. That has been so useful, because it can seem really overwhelming when you're starting out and you're trying to work out how to get into things and where to begin and what to do. Just to wrap up, what do you think funders and people are looking for at the moment in terms of your industry. What would you say would be the three or four things that people are looking for at the moment?

**Melanie Iredale** - Yeah... um... I mean with the streamers... I would say that what they seem to be really looking for is a kind of storifying that can only come from an almost fictionalizing of a film. It's a very fiction-inspired...formatted, you know, presenting a film as though it's kind of unveiling each step live as it goes... kind of format. And, you know they're doing very well on Netflix and, you know, Amazon, and the like. And a conversation that we've been part of, that we're really interested in Sheffield Doc Fest, is this, kind of, 'beyond the story' or 'beyond story'. Whilst those films can be excellent, it is about really trying to champion the industry to think, yeah, beyond story, beyond storifying, beyond fictionalizing.... all films. With this, ever greater number of platforms and so on, can we, between us, diversify the kind of form of films that we're watching? There are certainly platforms, like Mubi, Doc Alliance Films which is another on my website, that you should check out if you don't know it. It's a really thriving festival circuit, which is, you know, which is a diversity of cinema, and that includes storytelling and also not storytelling and different types of storytelling.

**Angela Clarke** - Well, listen, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

**Melanie Iredale** - The last thing I was going to say was, I'm really happy for my email to be shared because, I just think that, as you said at the beginning, you know, programmers and filmmakers, don't talk enough. Whilst I can't accept submissions via email, I'm really, really happy, we're always happy, to get questions where the answer is not in the guidelines. Sometimes they're just very particular to a certain film. We're always happy if you want to talk to us about submitting a rough cut where you need to say, 'I've done this, but I haven't done that' or 'I'll get another cut at this point', I'm always happy to enter into those conversations. I'm also always happy to receive a note where you're saying that, 'I've submitted my film, just to put it on your radar'. I'm always happy to receive those emails and even though we might not really be able to enter into a dialogue unless the film is in consideration. I know I can only speak for myself and for Doc Fest, but please don't think that you can't reach out to programmers.

**Angela Clarke** - For sure. Your email is...

**Melanie Iredale** -Yeah, it is [melanie.iredale@sheffdocfest.com](mailto:melanie.iredale@sheffdocfest.com)

**Angela Clarke** - That's great. Thank you so much. In my experience, everyone at the festival has always been super lovely. People are just really friendly when you go. There's loads of free events to go to and free parties where you can go and meet people you've never met before and chat to random people, which is part of the fun of it. I'm looking forward to when it's back next year and I can go in person again.

**Melanie Iredale** – Yeah, here's hoping we can have parties!

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah, who thought you'd miss the Mercure bar! And all the other places around about it. Thank you so much for your time. I hope to see you at some point in the future at the festival when things are back up and running.

**Melanie Iredale** – Thank you!

**Angela Clarke** - Thank you. Take care. Bye-bye.

**Melanie Iredale** – Bye!

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