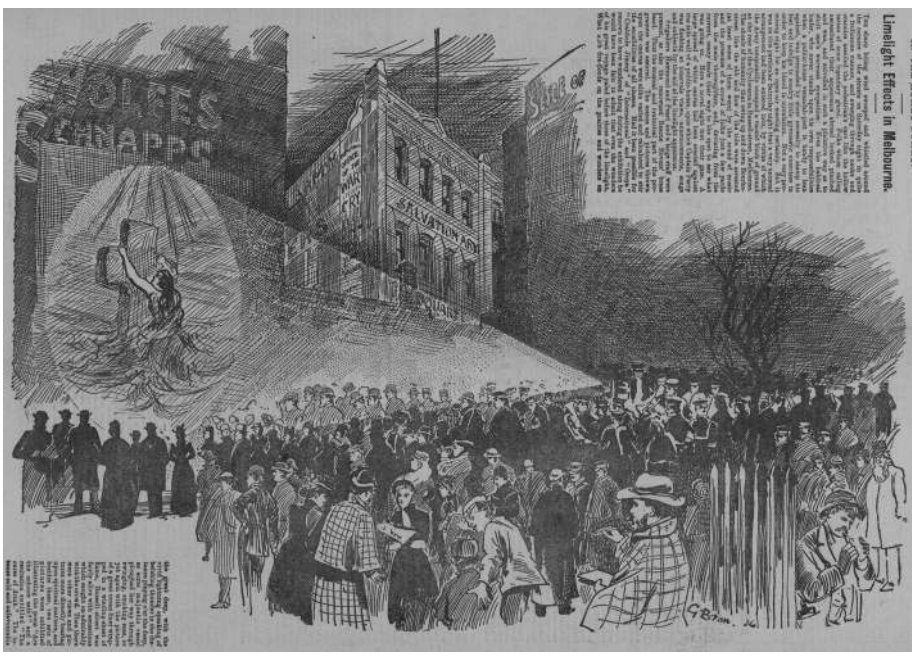
The documentary field

Setting the scene

Documentary has a history in Australia that stretches back to the beginnings of world cinema in the 1890s. Cinema's early 'machines' of vision made possible a new circulation of everyday and ceremonial images just as Australia was becoming a federated nation. From the first days of film production on the island-continent, they gave rise to exploratory kinds of documentary presentation. Subsequently, across more than a century, documentary has been the longest-running, continuously sustained, enterprise of screen production in the country. This book sets out to explore the ways in which Australian documentary has developed over this time.

Before outlining the approach to be followed in this study, the implications of using the nation of Australia as an organising category may be noted. The idea of nation relates generally to the institutions, ways of life, and shared or contested values and attitudes of its people. It also relates specifically to the organisations that have promoted documentary as part of the screen industry in Australia. So, for instance, governments – both federal and state – have provided critical support to documentary. They have acted as a client for sponsored versions of the form and have generated much of the infrastructure through which documentaries have been produced and have reached national and international audiences. They have also assisted it by



1.1 A lantern slide presentation by the Salvation Army, 1894. *The War Cry*, 28 July 1894. *Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria*

means of regulation, including policies intended to encourage investment in production and promote film distribution and culture. The national frame is thus highly relevant. But it cannot be understood in isolation from international developments. Documentary form in Australia has evolved through interaction and dialogue with the filmmakers, distributors, exhibitors, audiences and broadcasters of other nations. What has shifted over time is the nature of that engagement and the ways in which it has impacted on films produced in Australia. As will be traced in chapter 3, from the first moment when international filmmakers brought cameras to the emerging nation, most sub-genres of documentary have their roots in the some 30 years of cinema that predated the coining of the term documentary. Subsequently, the national and the international have interacted with each other in diverse ways. At the time of writing, for instance, the need to encourage Australian (often called 'local') content and stories is often stated, to support cultural expression and foster the screen industry, while at the same time producers are urged to engage with the international markets for documentary, in a way that strengthens the sector nationally but brings pressures to downplay overtly Australian vocabulary and accent. There has been a long tradition of Australian filmmakers making documentaries on international topics. The question of what constitutes an Australian film has been a source of ongoing debate that will be touched upon in various chapters, as they pursue an

interest in the diverse intersections of the nation and its people with the documentary project in its myriad and ever-evolving forms.

The approach developed in this study defines documentary within a dynamic field of factors that enter into fluid configurations. It draws on wider scholarship, particularly the account of the 'axes of orientation' on which documentary is constituted, developed by the United States theorist and historian of the form, Bill Nichols: a community of practitioners, an institutional practice, a corpus of texts, and a constituency of viewers (Nichols 1991: pp. 14–31). It adopts, and adapts, these categories while adding another in telling the story of the field: the orientation of documentary to adjacent cultural institutions and resources. This approach is designed to show how, as a variable practice of cultural representation, documentary helps to define the affiliations of experience, memory and identity through which understandings of community, nation and citizenship are constituted.

Features of the field

To elaborate the framework of ideas used to investigate documentary developments and issues in later chapters, this section inflects some key terms of analysis available in the wider literature.

Communities of practitioners

Nichols (1991: pp. 14–15) uses the term community to describe cultural formations in which practitioners share a 'mandate' of representing reality and talk in a 'common language' about how to realise it. A sense of 'community identity' and membership comes, as he suggests, from participating in production, distribution, exhibition, festivals, conferences, training, publication, campaigning for resources, debate on policy, and discussion about technique and ways to reach audiences. It may be added that individuals enter the community by paths such as industry training, education, mentoring or informal collaboration, and experience documentary variously as a first step in media practice, an occasional option or a career-forming passion. The groups, networks and organisations that sustain a community of practice, in either tight-knit or looser form, develop in different ways, mutate or disband (p. 15). And the 'intensity and extent' of the documentary activity associated with them vary 'by region or nation'. Such mutation is evident in the Australian situation, where several documentary sectors have developed, with varying local and international links, in ways influenced by commercial, institutional, and independent objectives, modes of operating and relations with audiences. In this environment, different communities

of practice have formed alongside one another, sometimes creating tensions that lead to new organisational arrangements in efforts to resolve them. For considering this context, the idea of community may be given two further emphases. First, to amplify Nichols' remark that the documentary community of practitioners is self-defining, in the sense that its members are 'those who make or otherwise engage in the circulation of documentary films' (p. 14), this community in the Australian context needs to be seen as including not only the filmmakers but a range of social actors in screen assistance, administration, broadcasting and other organisations, whose roles and interrelations change considerably over time. Second, even if a documentary community is self-defining, it may also be characterised by the style of its interactions with other social groups or organisations, including those whose stories practitioners take responsibility for representing.

Institutions and processes

Because of the technologies, costs, multiple operations and roles, and low levels of commercial returns entailed in its production and distribution, documentary has depended on some type of sponsorship, through public support or private investment. Typically, therefore, the sense of creative community is influenced by working with organisational and industrial structures and processes. As Nichols points out, practitioners both 'adhere to and inflect' the procedures, working principles, modes of operation and ideas about form and style that 'arise and contend' in the institutional settings of documentary (1991: pp. 18, 16). Important in Australia is the historical diversity of those settings. Distinctive forms of government assistance have developed for film and television production; however, within the major institutional structures, often documentary is a minor player and developments are driven primarily by concerns with assisting the higher-cost forms of feature film and television drama. A focus in later chapters is, therefore, on how, and to what extent, institutional and industrial processes are geared to documentary activity and, in turn, how practitioners have negotiated them. Notable at the national-institutional level is the strong continuation of government involvement, for instance through the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia), well after the cinema-only days of documentary, as a production house then a commissioning body capable of interacting with television. In addition, several other national and state organisations have supported documentary, among other practices, with consideration given to objectives such as participation and access, in relation to schemes for women's, Indigenous, multicultural and other filmmaking, in changing social and media environments. Complementing the screen assistance institutions is a consolidated tradition of public television, affording standing to documentary as a genre of information, entertainment and inquiry, which

has been maintained in combination with the more ratings-driven programming of commercial free-to-air networks and recently the digital television and online media environment.

A body of films: documentary genres

The documentary field as a whole is sometimes treated as a genre, in contradistinction to narrative feature film. More usually, it is broken up in several different and overlapping ways, for varied purposes, into what could be considered genres, or sub-genres. Such means of dividing up the field include the following, to be elaborated in a moment: several methodologies of media scholarship used to group films for critical analysis and historical inquiry; patterns in the expressive use of technologies in production; several specialised discipline-based forms of filmmaking; institutional policy processes for screen assistance related to often content-based categories of exhibition, distribution and programming; and forms of engagement with, and by, participants and audiences. Our aim is not to tidy up these miscellaneous schemas but to explore the multiple dimensions of genre in practice.

To take the first of these usages, in theoretical and historical scholarship documentary is not easily defined as a stable genre in terms of shared thematic, stylistic or narrative conventions, as some types of fiction are. Acknowledging this, Nichols (2001: pp. 99–137) argues that documentary is familiarly recognised as 'a corpus of texts', distinguished by a function of representing reality from one or more perspectives, a corpus he characterises in terms of several modes, akin to genres, that have developed in particular historical circumstances. The poetic mode has affinities with the modernist aesthetic of exploring formal and conceptual associations in a medium, for instance between graphic qualities of line, movement and colour, and qualities of sound (pp. 102–5). The classic expository mode, anchoring the meaning of images by the use of a 'voice-of-god' narration, often with systematic use of evidentiary editing, was established in cinematic documentary and played a major part in, for instance, a tradition of citizen education promoted notably by John Grierson from the early days of sound film. The observational mode, coming to prominence in the 1960s, was facilitated by the advent of portable cameras and sound-recording equipment that made it possible to record both images and sounds of a scene directly and present them from the viewpoint of an onlooker not interfering with events, ostensibly, or imposing a master narration on them. Different observational approaches are conventionally acknowledged, for instance between the ideal, associated with 'direct cinema', of remaining detached from what is being shot and the 'intercessional' tendency, associated with *cinéma vérité*, in which camera and crew are 'avowedly present and inquiring, ready to catalyze, if

necessary, an interaction between participants or between participants and themselves' (Rabiger 1998: p. 324). The interactive mode developed especially through independent filmmaking from the 1970s onwards, but also in journalistic television documentary. In contrast to detached narration or observation, it promotes communicative exchange between filmmakers and participants through, for instance, techniques such as interview, talking heads and testimony. To these modes may be added that of dramatic reconstruction, using actors in a studio or on location, to represent past or present situations that cannot be otherwise documented, suggest details of experience and behaviour, evoke qualities of emotion or memory, or portray and interpret evidence from a particular perspective for viewers to assess. This mode was used intermittently for technical and aesthetic reasons from the early cinematic days of documentary; it has also featured in experimental documentary and, increasingly, in television documentaries that incorporate dramatic entertainment values (Paget 1998: pp. 116–39).

Nichols (1991: pp. 56–75) contends that documentary finds a particularly self-aware form in the reflexive mode, which draws attention to the process of filmmaking and hence the position from which meaning is being constructed, rather than creating the impression of capturing reality in an unmediated way. Similarly, he claims, the performative mode highlights the role being played by filmmaker and participants in enacting the reality being explored, and so affirms more fully than, for instance, didactic exposition, the potential of documentary to create knowledge in a process that is responsive to the experience of those who participate in the making of the work. These two modes are referenced by a range of films that signpost their own reflexivity and performance – for instance, by stylistic tropes that foreground the mediating presence of technique and filmmaker. However, this does not mean that consideration of the effects of representation on what is shown, and the social relationships being acted out in documentary practices, are confined to the use of these particular modes, nor, as Carl Plantinga (1997: pp. 214–18) points out, that audiences fail to recognise or evaluate the presence and mediating functions of other modes. In sum, characteristic modes of constructing images and sounds have developed in specific historical circumstances and, while there can be continuing adherence to particular modes, much documentary has become hybrid in orientation, taking up or combining modes for new objectives to explore aspects of the world through different representational strategies for different social purposes.

While the use of formal modes is a focus in many of the completed works to be discussed in this book, genre also needs to be considered as a negotiable concern with form in the processes of production. Particular production contexts may favour the consolidation of certain genres, or aesthetic experimentation, or elements of both. New audiovisual technologies often support innovative uses of documentary form, though the technology itself

does not determine decisions about its application or the meanings it is capable of generating. It has already been noted, for instance, that if the availability of light-weight, synch-sound equipment subtended experiments in detached observation, it has also facilitated more interactive and personal forms of address. While reflecting the significance of changing technologies, case studies in following chapters will show that documentaries can find form and voice in varied ways, depending on how the resources of a medium are negotiated in the relations of filmmaking.

In some sites of filmmaking, documentary genres are identified with particular disciplines. So, for example, 'anthropological' documentary has developed in relation to the frameworks of knowledge, research processes, and uses of audiovisual technique and evidence in the discipline to which it corresponds. As has often been recognised in policy rationales, there needs to be a place for documentaries whose treatment and duration reflect a disciplinary context and do not necessarily conform to the 'normal constraints' of, for instance, television programming (Gonski 1997: p. 66).

Genre is also a category of production and distribution in more specifically media-based institutions and industry. This is evident in the forms of in-house institutional filmmaking, from the early days of Australian state-based production of different types of work to service the needs of other government departments or for a more general public, to the changing production and programming units (for example, 'arts', 'science and natural history') within today's broadcast organisations. It is seen, too, in changing government schemes of assistance for documentary production, and in the commissioning of different kinds of work by production companies (through Film Australia's 'National Interest Program', for example) and by broadcasters and narrowcasters – in the demand, for instance, for types of documentary as 'commodities' catering to increasingly segmented terrestrial, cable and satellite television markets (Rofekamp 2000).

In these diverse cases, genre functions as a variable relationship of documentary to audiences. In doing so, it may indicate modes as in formal analysis, but not always. So, for instance, at the time of writing, Screen Australia's online 'Searchable Film Database' website used 'genre' to publicise its searchable database of documentary titles produced since 1980, listing some 50 different documentary genres (Screen Australia 2010c). Many of these related to disciplines ('history', 'science and technology') or popular culture interests and tastes ('travel'), or included titles made by or with broadcasting units ('religion'). Occasionally they were specified by technique ('animation'). But the generic divisions most obviously allowed recognition by content, indicating what the works are about and potentially who might be interested in the subject for diverse reasons ('children', 'education', 'environment and conservation', 'health', 'Indigenous people', 'sport and recreation', 'women' and so on). The formal mode of treatment is not apparent in such

groupings, although tendencies to use certain modes in particular kinds of work may be expected.

Another example of how genre functions for particular purposes, bridging audience interests and production pathways, is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) site 'Independent Production: Documentaries' that (again, at the time of writing) publicised the 'types of programs' that its Documentaries unit was looking for (ABC 2009). These types were history, science, religion and ethics, contemporary, Indigenous, and natural history. This is not a complete listing of the types of documentary referred to on the ABC website or screened by this broadcaster, but it indicates how documentary genres are identified according to context – here including the purpose of encouraging independent filmmakers to propose documentaries to develop through commissioning for television broadcast and 'multiplatform' programming. Particular styles were not prescribed, but the emphasis was on creating programs with strong story and character interest, to add to knowledge and resonate with the public broadcaster's 'broad demographic'. Nonetheless, within such institutional settings, an understanding of modes is valuable as a resource for both practical and theoretical purposes. As Michael Rabiger (1998: pp. 336–42) reminds us, finding an expressive form for the treatment of a subject requires means of handling time and interactions together with ideas and argument. There are many patterns for doing so – for instance, the principles of arranging events to represent a process, a journey, a historical excursion and so on – and diverse modes may be used to arrive at the structure of a film.

These multiple functions suggest a pragmatics of genre, an attention to the often-intersecting ways in which the label is used in specific practices. Within these terms, questions of form as well as content remain important for the production, distribution, analysis and cultural reception of documentary. But the aim in what follows is not to arrive at a definitive taxonomy of self-contained 'textual' forms. Rather, it is to explore in the Australian context how representational modes and conventions are used in historical relationships of practice, through which documentaries find their purpose and form.

Deployments of cultural resources

Complementing the attention to uses of medium-specific forms and techniques in this book is an interest in how documentary interacts with and contributes to other cultural institutions and resources, and operates as a relay of social knowledge. This is a basis of documentary that is added in this study to Nichols' flexible definitional schema. Sometimes the idea for a documentary develops in partnership with groups or organisations such as educational bodies; cultural heritage institutions, including archives,

museums, libraries and galleries; government departments; non-government organisations; community associations; or other bodies pursuing varied purposes, promoting the development and use of their resources, and possibly contributing to the distribution or exhibition of the work. Documentary makers start from a greater or lesser familiarity with a subject, and development and production often depend on interaction with others who provide access to institutional, professional, disciplinary or experiential knowledge. Attention to cultural resources is important because the full content of research, liaison and fieldwork involved in documentary filmmaking is not necessarily reflected in the completed work. Sometimes the research process that informs a representation is explicitly signalled 'on-screen', but at other times it remains 'off-screen'. Furthermore – while the contributions of surrounding groups and organisations are important to many projects – cultural, legal, privacy or other considerations in accessing and using materials may affect the development of a film. Such considerations are part of documentary engagements in representing historical realities. Attending to the ways in which documentary interacts with adjacent cultural institutions and resources, although not generally made explicit as a methodological category in screen history and theory, is important for understanding its grounding in varied social contexts.

Ideas and the role of audiences

As implied already, conceptions of audience have an important role in the documentary field. So, for instance, policies of screen assistance are frequently based on combined economic and cultural rationales of supporting the screen industry and communicating Australian stories to audiences. Filmmakers have more or less definite ideas of who their audience or audiences will be, ideas mediated by particular structures of distribution and exhibition. This does not mean playing to an assumed audience taste or outlook at the cost of integrity of representation. But an authentic treatment of reality can include consideration of the needs and predispositions of audiences, and here the forms of 'appeal' to viewers are relevant. In traditional rhetoric, the term appeal stands for the use of particular forms of proof: logical argument, that is, demonstration or reasoning supported by the ordering of argument and evidence (logos), emotional proof (pathos), and ethical presentation or credibility of the communicator (ethos). Other writers have established that these proofs have currency in documentary (Nichols 2001: pp. 42–6; Plantinga 1997: pp. 86–98), so they will not be elaborated on at this point; they will be considered in various works and, while the rhetorical terminology will not be invoked in every case, these appeals provide 'cues' for audiences to participate in the construction of meaning, bringing to a work their own expectations, values and interpretive skills

(Nichols 1991: p. 24). Documentary composition includes the use of techniques – such as exposition and commentary, as well as narrative principles of organisation – in contrast to fiction film that primarily relies on the latter to create an imaginary world. But in documentary engagements with reality, these appeals help to communicate cultural and personal stories in the process of sharing and interpreting experience.

Further to this general emphasis on the active role of audiences, several kinds of audiences may be envisaged, for instance in relation to different types of distribution even for the same work, as when documentaries are made for television but also circulate through festival, community or educational settings. Additionally, while the idea of audience is often tied to the reception of the finished work, there are situations in which audiences can directly influence a work in progress, as when participants view a film and their feedback is taken into account at an editing stage, for example. And as if to stress the connections between modes and uses of technology, 'interactivity' has come increasingly to refer to not only filmmaker–participant relations but also the potential on digital platforms for 'users' of media to respond to a work with content of their own, contributing as 'producers' to further developments of a project.

Cultural projects of documentary

The emphasis in outlining the categories above is on documentary processes, the activities in which practitioners interact with others in communities of practice and social and institutional contexts, use techniques for particular purposes, draw on and generate resources, and invite audience engagements. This emphasis reflects the combined theoretical and practical interests of the chapters that follow, and a concern to trace connections between documentary forms and contexts. This concern is akin to that pursued in other accounts with documentary as a historically located field of practice, including the analysis of general projects that the media scholar John Corner (2000a) offers with reference to the British experience. In Corner's broad sense of the term, 'project' indicates a way of functioning that develops in a cultural environment of ideas and aesthetic forms, production and distribution arrangements, and engagements with audiences.

Corner (p. 2) identifies three 'classic' documentary projects. These are 'democratic civics', which has provided 'publicity for citizenship' under official sponsorship; 'journalistic enquiry and exposition', associated with the television industry; and 'radical interrogation and alternative perspective', which has developed through independent filmmaking and 'attempts a criticism and a correction of other accounts in circulation'. Broadly, Corner contends that these projects, and their forms of connection with audiences, have been affected by a fourth, which he calls 'documentary as diversion'