Australian Documentary
History, practices and genres

Drawing on interviews with leading industry sources and containing discussion of over 200 documentaries, Australian Documentary: History, Practices and Genres brings to life over a century of documentary making and connects it to international debates in criticism, theory and history.

Documentary is the oldest continuous form of screen production in Australia, and today plays a pivotal part in our creative industries. This incisive book covers the development of documentary in Australia from the early days of cinema to the coming of television and to the digital environment. Addressing the issues facing today’s documentary makers, the authors explore the role of the documentary in shaping the ‘imagined community’ of the nation.

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Australian Documentary

History, Practices and Genres

Trish FitzSimons
Pat Laughren
Dugald Williamson
For Andrew and Isabelle, Darby and Finola, Timothy and Patrick
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The authors

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Preface and acknowledgements

The history of Australian documentary has a long list of credits. The list runs from the filmmakers and participants to sponsors, producers, distributors, exhibitors, broadcasters, administrators, archivists, educators, audiences and beyond. These roles have altered through periods of cultural, institutional and technological change in which documentary has taken many different forms. This book explores the relations between these forms and the practices of production, distribution and reception in which they have emerged. It covers the historical developments of documentary in Australia from the early days of cinema to the coming of television and the digital environment. These developments are framed by a series of underlying questions and issues. How have documentary filmmakers pursued purposes of expression, information, promotion, entertainment, interrogation and witness in responding to their historical world, and what are the implications of their work for participants and audiences? In what ways have particular genres and techniques been used to define realities and meet new needs, and from whose point of view? How has documentary been constituted in relation to the category of nation and to international developments in production and distribution? What can be learned from the dynamic history of the form for documentary practice, policy and study, present and future?

Our approach to these questions combines institutional history, analysis of forms of representation and practitioner perspectives. It has been made possible by access to several different types of sources that we have integrated. At the outset we are pleased to acknowledge our obvious debt to the work of many authors, including Albert Moran, Chris Long, Peter Beilby, Ross Lansell, Megan McMurchy, Graham Shirley, Brian Adams, Ina Bertrand, Deane Williams, Martha Ansara, Lisa Milner, Ian Dunlop, Alasdair McGregor, Peter Hughes, Ken Inglis, the Filmnews editorial collective and others who have published studies of individual documentary filmmakers, institutions, periods or genres in Australia drawn on in this volume. We acknowledge also our debt to wider scholarship on Australian media and...
culture, and international work on documentary history and aesthetics by John Corner, Bill Nichols and others, with which we bring our methodology and account of Australian documentary into dialogue.

In writing this book we have been assisted by the availability of many reports, submissions, research and policy papers and other resources of federal and state screen agencies as well as industry and professional bodies; generally, statistics and specific statements about policy of the state organisations are taken from their annual reports unless otherwise noted. At the federal level, statistics are from Screen Australia’s Get the Picture (AFC 2010, http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/default.html) unless otherwise noted. Also essential to our task has been new information gained through interviews and discussions with many people in relation to their varied roles in filmmaking, administration, policy and broadcasting.

This material has informed the case studies, of varying length, which exemplify the correlations between documentary forms and institutional and industry practices of documentary support, production and distribution. Along with the main stages of our general argument, these case studies are introduced by headings and sub-headings in the chapters. Some of them consider one or more individual films, including aspects of their production history. (We follow the convention of using the term ‘film’ in this book to refer to works produced for the cinema, television, video or digital media.) Other case studies focus on the story of a particular practitioner, organisation or company, or aspects of industry culture (for example, broadcasting in chapter 8), or filmmaking practice that extends into diverse social fields (for example, education and civics in chapter 10), in order to illustrate the changing nature of documentary as a cultural project in a range of contexts.

In examining general trends, our work is necessarily selective. One of the limits of the present volume is that it includes only a cross-section of work by established, consolidating and newer practitioners and cannot claim to be comprehensive in its coverage of significant films and filmmakers who have helped to build documentary culture in Australia and more widely. In our case studies we have often tipped the balance towards discussion of work that is not necessarily widely known, recognising that more extensive studies of several well-known documentary makers are already in public circulation. Readers are encouraged to treat ‘Australian Screen Online’ as an audiovisual complement to this volume; our filmography gives specific websites of cited documentaries.

This book has its origins in research that we have carried out over more than a decade, as well as in shared teaching interests. We thank the many people and organisations that facilitated our project. Our work was assisted by an Australian Research Council Small Grant, which enabled us to undertake many of the interviews for the book. The Griffith Institute of Higher Education provided support for exploring the teaching-related dimensions
of our research. We are grateful for the research and conference assistance provided by the Griffith Film School and the School of Arts and the former Faculty of Arts at University of New England. For opportunities to present and receive feedback on work in progress, thanks are due to several journals and conference organisations, including *Continuum, Media International Australia, Metro, Studies in Documentary Film*, the Australian International Documentary Conference, the Australian Screen Production Education and Research Association, the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association, the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools, and the annual international conference, ‘Visible Evidence’.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to those who participated in recorded interviews and subsequently checked and updated transcripts, or in more informal discussions and correspondence, for their generosity in sharing knowledge and their trust in our use of materials. Through further consultation we have often summarised or adapted their comments as well as quoting them directly in the case studies related to their work. Every effort has been made to identify and acknowledge the incorporation of these and all other sources correctly, but if advised of errors or omissions we would seek to rectify them in any future usage. The names of interviewees and discussants are given in the Interview list at the end of the References section of this book, as a way of including details of the exchanges more fully. We thank Kay de Chastel and Robyn Pratten for transcribing numerous interviews.

Our thanks go also to library, administrative and technical staff at Griffith University and the University of New England; the AFI Research Library; staff at Screen Australia who have helped our research, including Rosemary Curtis and Rachel Cullen; Kurt Schubert and Kitty van Vuuren, Rose Williamson and Matthew Wengert for research assistance.

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Preface and acknowledgements

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Above all, we express our gratitude to Gary Reilly, Therese Collie, Rose Williamson and our respective families, without whose support and understanding this book would not have been possible.
Abbreviations and acronyms

10BA Section of the *Australian Income Tax Assessment Act* that allowed concessions on private investment in film production

ABA Australian Broadcasting Authority

ABC Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Commission until 1983)

ABS Australian Bureau of Statistics

ABT Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (forerunner of ABA)

Accord Category of film funded by the FFC under a documentary investment agreement with the television networks

ACS Australian Content Standard

ACTF Australian Children’s Television Foundation

ADG Australian Directors Guild

AFC Australian Film Commission

AFCH Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities

AFI Australian Film Institute

AFTRS Australian Film, Television & Radio School

AIATSIS Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

ANFB Australian National Film Board

ASDA Australian Screen Directors Association

ATSIC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission

AWG Australian Writers’ Guild

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

BTCE Bureau of Transport & Communications Economics

CAAMA Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association

CH 4 Channel 4, United Kingdom

CDB Creative Development Branch, AFC

CFU Commonwealth Film Unit

CTVPF Commercial Television Production Fund

d director
## Abbreviations and acronyms

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>DCA</td>
<td>Department of Communications &amp; the Arts (federal)</td>
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<td>DCITA</td>
<td>Department of Communications, Information Technology &amp; the Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEET</td>
<td>Department of Employment, Education &amp; Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOI</td>
<td>Department of Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVD</td>
<td>digital video disc</td>
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<tr>
<td>EBU</td>
<td>European Broadcasting Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ed</td>
<td>editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ep</td>
<td>executive producer</td>
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<tr>
<td>FACTS</td>
<td>Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations</td>
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<td>FFC</td>
<td>Australian Film Finance Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Film Australia</td>
<td>Federal government's film production unit</td>
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<td>FLICS</td>
<td>Film Licensing Investment Company Scheme</td>
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<td>IDFA</td>
<td>International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam</td>
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<td>NFB</td>
<td>National Film Board of Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFSA</td>
<td>National Film &amp; Sound Archive</td>
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<td>NIDF</td>
<td>National Indigenous Documentary Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIP</td>
<td>National Interest Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Accord</td>
<td>Category of FFC-funded films outside the Accord agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>producer</td>
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<tr>
<td>PFTC</td>
<td>Pacific Film and Television Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>RTE</td>
<td>Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
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<td>SBSi</td>
<td>SBS Independent</td>
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<td>SPAA</td>
<td>Screen Producers Association of Australia</td>
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<td>TAIMA</td>
<td>Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>writer</td>
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<td>WFF</td>
<td>Women's Film Fund, AFC</td>
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