

**Australian documentary: History, practices and genres (Book Review)**

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Published

2011

Journal Title

Communication, Politics & Culture

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

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*Australian documentary: history, practices and genres*  
Trish Fitzsimons, Pat Laughren and Dugald Williamson  
Cambridge University Press: Port Melbourne, 2011  
ISBN 978-0-521-16799-4 Paperback

**David Adair**

### **Australian documentary: from Victorian Melbourne to the digital age**

Some of the racegoers who turned out for the 1896 Melbourne Cup differed from their contemporaries and those who attended in previous years. Thanks to Marius Sestier, a visiting French motion camera operator, and Walter Barnett, his Australian business partner and a society photographer in his own right, those lucky punters of 1896 have been granted a measure of immortality, as the subjects of one of Australia's first film productions. Visit the Australian Screen website of the National Film and Sound Archive and you can watch them self-consciously promenade in their top hats and bustles, some peering with delighted curiosity at the unfamiliar motion camera and its operator, others trying their best to ignore the intrusion. From time to time, Barnett appears within Sestier's framing of events, in order to ginger up the action with some well-timed hat-waving, or to tap the flanks of a horse that is obstructing the camera's view. The basic pattern of documentary's ambivalent relationships with its subjects and testimonial vocation can be discerned in these flickering late Victorian film fragments.

Australian documentaries have been produced, screened and critically assessed ever since. Of all the modes of screen production in the country, documentary has the longest continuous history and today – as the Australian Screen website example demonstrates – it is playing important and varied roles in the digital and other creative industries. The three authors of this new study of the topic make these observations early. In doing so, any lingering shadow cast by documentary's more glamorous fictional contemporaries and rivals for attention is at least partially lifted. This is a large and significant topic and the authors faced a daunting task to produce a coherent and insightful account of such a sprawling and complex set of phenomena. The key to their success in meeting the challenge is the methodology.

No single history of documentary can hope to be comprehensive and the authors freely acknowledge this point, opting instead for a deliberately selective mix of institutional histories, analyses of forms of representation in more than 200 examples of Australian documentaries, and practitioner perspectives derived from the existing scholarly field, industry and other archives and interviews conducted for the book. The institutional history focus allows for discussion of the changing policy frameworks and means of public and private support for Australian documentary production and distribution. Including analyses of formal qualities brings in examples of attempts by documentary filmmakers to come to terms with the socio-historical orientation of their profession: an ethos that finds expression in multi-vocal techniques, hard questions about the ethics of topic choice, and the long and dynamic project of documentary filmmaking in the service of civic capacity-building.

The multi-faceted account required of such a complex topic area means that the book's three co-authors – all experienced researchers in the field – have had to carefully match their theoretical strengths with extensive historical and qualitative research. Their method is designed to delve into documentary's diverse and sometimes contradictory motivations and functions: documentary as medium of expression, popular entertainment, witness to events, critic of historical and contemporary issues, and instrument of public persuasion.

Documentary filmmaking is a problem-generating practice because of the inherent tensions between its status as a producer of factual content and its powers to disassemble or assemble truth, to interrogate or confirm it. As the authors note, the rise of the various 'factual entertainment' formats since the 1990s poses particular challenges for a practice that through most of its history was characterised in terms of serious intentions. Citing John Corner, they point out that this development can be said to constitute another project – one of diversion – to rival the existing projects identified with established documentary traditions: 'Grierson's democratic civics, journalism's inquiry and exposition and independent documentary's alternative perspective' (p.184). It is typical of this book's sophisticated take on its topic, however, that this observation is not used to frame the 'problem of documentary'. Rather, the authors point out that there are forms of documentary production – such as ethnographic, scientific and art-based animation – which have a life beyond the television broadcasting context within which 'factual entertainment' has had its

greatest impacts. The subsequent discussions qualify any thesis of documentary's historical 'crisis', by taking into account not only the varied modes of documentary production and distribution but the contexts within, and the terms under which, documentaries and their purposes continue to be problematised and valued. Documentary continues to generate interest and disputes among public institutions, practitioners, audiences, professional organisations and private companies. If that isn't a measure of continued relevance, what is?

*Australian documentary: history, practices and genres* may deal with the specific topic of Australian documentary but it contains valuable insights for those with an interest in the broader topic of documentary as a mode of filmmaking. The first chapter opens the discussion by identifying the field of documentary in general terms, both as a global practice and in its Australian context. The rationale for an Australian focus cites documentary's positions in relation to national institutions and peoples. Documentary has not only benefited from, and been formed by, these relations but has played a role in constituting nations and community identities in turn.

The opening chapter's survey of the field is followed by an examination of how documentaries make meaning: a chapter centred on questions of *voice*. Here the authors explore issues of selection, expression and the combination of sound and image, using case studies drawn from the Australian context: Donna Ives's *A Memory* (1999), whose subject is an elderly friend of the Indigenous director's mother; and Jan Cattoni's *After Maeve* (2006), about a family working through the grieving process after the death of a daughter. The discussion of the first film raises issues about memoir and its public repercussions, while the latter film demonstrates ways in which commissioning producers can shape a documentary project.

The following chapter returns to the scene of the 1896 Melbourne Cup, before tracing the early history of documentary production in Australia, including the role of the Salvation Army's Limelight Department, which in 1901 became the country's first production company when it was registered as The Australian Kinematographic Company. From the late colonial period onwards, publicly and commercially financed documentaries were used in the service of ethnography and historical record, to capture scenes of daily life and exceptional events. The presence of documentary

filmmakers was eagerly sought by Antarctic explorers like Mawson and – as the authors note – was even made a condition of the financing of Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Atlantic Expedition of 1914-16. This chapter on documentary's role in recording Australian 'scenes of life' goes on to cover the arrival of sound in 1929 – an arrival in the literal sense, when a Fox Movietone sound recording unit sailed into Sydney to public acclaim – and the focusing effect that World War Two had on government attitudes to documentary as a medium of information. The War was to prompt the founding of national bodies like the Film Division in the Department of Information and the Australian National Film Board. The chapter ends with the post-war production of the very Menzian *The Queen in Australia* (1954), which was the first colour, feature-length 35mm film made in the country.

I mention the contents of the first three chapters in some detail merely to convey a sense of this book's scope and not because they are more worthy of attention than the subsequent ones. Those later chapters cover topics such as the coming of television in the 1950s, the role of the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia) in the 1960s, and independent documentary in the 1970s. They also deal with national and state policy initiatives and questions around partnerships and co-production. The shifting conditions of government support for film production in Australia – and documentary's place within that nexus of commercial imperatives and public efforts to compensate for market failure – is the subject of a chapter on the Australian Film Commission, the absorption of Film Australia into Screen Australia, and the Film Finance Corporation. Chapters on the previously mentioned challenge from the 'factual entertainment' formats, documentary and civics, and current trends then bring the discussions to a satisfying conclusion.

This is a fine contribution to the histories of Australian filmmaking and of documentary production more broadly. The authors' marshalling of scholarly and historical materials, use of carefully chosen examples and case studies, and insights drawn from interviews with practitioners will make their book a valuable reference for anyone wishing to understand why a visiting Frenchman pointing a movie camera at a crowd of Australian punters in 1896 is still remembered in 2011.

## Bio

David Adair is Convenor of the Master of Communication and Graduate Diploma of Communication programs (OUA) in the Faculty of Humanities at Griffith University. His research interests include the sociology of the arts and culture, issues of cultural citizenship, and media studies. He has authored and co-authored reports for the Cultural Ministers Council of Australian governments and the OZPAC forum of Australasian performing arts centres. David's publications include: (with Kay Ferres and Ronda Jones) 'Cultural indicators: assessing the state of the arts in Australia,' in *Cultural Trends*, v.19, #4, Dec. 2010, pp.261-272; 'Difficult news: some heretical thoughts on the queer gospel,' in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010; and (as co-author with Kay Ferres) *Who Profits from the Arts? Taking the Measure of Culture*, Currency House, 2007.