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A Claim to Truth: 
Documentary, Politics, Production

Annie Goldson

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 
Film, Television and Media Studies, 
The University of Auckland, 2004
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Full copies of the five documentary texts referred to in the body of the thesis are stored on the accompanying DVDs.
**Abstract**

The following thesis examines how documentary texts, in particular those that are associated with the tradition of political documentary, negotiate their way into being. For this purpose, I use a series of documentary case studies, each one structured around a work of my own. The five documentaries I examine were made through the decade 1990–2000 and, although these works address a range of specific cultural and political issues, they were produced either out of the US or New Zealand, the two countries within which I have lived while a documentary maker.

My methodological approach is two-fold. First, I place each documentary within a framework designed by Bill Nichols as a way of defining documentary. Nichols, a major presence in the field of documentary studies, looks at documentary as constructed through a matrix of factors: the interplay of possible documentary modes and styles, pressures brought to bear through the institutional context surrounding documentary production, such as funding and distribution, the expectations of the genres’ audiences, and the dialogue and influences generated by a community of documentary practitioners and their films and videos. In following Nichols’ model, I offer up a modal and textual analysis for each of my own works cited, and examine, through a mixture of anecdote and theory, how funders, distributors, audiences and my fellow makers shaped my documentaries. In carrying out this examination, I also highlight certain debates that raged through the decade, particularly around documentary realism and identity politics, that were to have considerable impact on my work.

My second methodological approach is to situate each work within a history of “political documentary”. In Chapter One of this thesis I have attempted to categorize the various formulations of the sub-genre, which have developed since the inception of film over a century ago. In the ensuing chapters I examine how each of my documentaries draws on
that history. My own body of works of course was produced in a relatively short period, but even within this time the historical changes the world has undergone are immense. Documentary is ever sensitive to its context and I chart the impact of political change on the texts being scrutinized.

Although the focus, my own work, may appear narrow, the thesis draws on the tradition of participant observation, and seeks, by analyzing the complexities of production within a series of case studies, to cast light on contemporary documentary practice generally.
Acknowledgements

I want to sincerely thank my supervisors Professors Roger Horrocks and Laurence Simmons for their patience and guidance and my colleagues, makers and theorists, locally and internationally, for providing me with stimulation and assistance. Chloe Heffernan, my research assistant, has also been a huge help, especially as the project drew, in finicky fashion, to a close.

I also want to thank unreservedly all of the documentary subjects that have participated in my documentaries over the years, who have permitted me to share their stories, so often painful, with the rest of the world. I undertook all my documentaries believing that they might have a positive impact, and know that without the generous permission of my participants I would have accomplished very little.

And, of course, I want to acknowledge my inner circle, my family and friends, for putting up with me during my long journey to thesis completion, helping me with the frustrations and sharing in my achievements.