1
Introduction: Representation and Documentary Emotion

To speak about documentary is to immediately bring to mind the genre’s associations with science, education and social responsibility, or what Bill Nichols has called the ‘discourses of sobriety’ (Representing Reality 3–4). In focusing on documentary and the emotions, this book is not proposing that these strong associations be bypassed, but rather that the emotionality inherent to sobriety should be more fully examined. This is an investigation into how individuals are positioned by documentary representation as subjects that are entrenched in the emotions, whether it is pleasure, hope, pain, empathy or disgust. The individuals I am referring to are, in some instances, film-makers, and in others, those who are featured in the documentary. By ‘entrenched’ I mean not simply that the poetics of the film, such as music, rhetoric or narrative, frame individuals in ways that elicit emotional responses from viewers, but that emotion confers cultural meanings onto others. Emotions are not only private matters; they also circulate in the public sphere where they are fashioned across histories of significations, different media forms and other technologies of social life. Thus, two critical considerations guide my analysis in this book. The first examines how emotion is produced in particular documentaries and how the audience is addressed by this emotion. The second is concerned with the important cultural ramifications of this production and this address to the audience – I am interested in how emotionality marries with the social project of documentary in ways that make the non-fiction genre a compelling site for understanding how fantasies of self and other circulate through specific textual practices. This task requires a fresh approach, one that re-focuses
debates around the study of documentary in order to account for the significance of the emotions in social life.

In the chapters that follow I explore how such an approach might take shape through a consideration of some contemporary trends in documentary and how these reference particular modes of selfhood. Each chapter presents a detailed investigation of the role of emotion in shaping perceptions of subjectivity in a defined social context. Collectively, these studies evaluate how different manifestations of the self are located by emotions in ways that effect their position within formations or technologies of power, such as the aesthetics of the text and the social conditions represented in the world of the documentary. Over the last decade a growing number of documentary films have gained theatrical release, signalling not only renewed commercial success, but also a new relevance for the genre in the eyes of film-makers and viewers. In looking more deeply at the way documentary circulates in the public sphere, this book goes some way towards understanding the basis of the popular appeal of documentary and documentary culture. By way of an introduction, I survey the different theoretical approaches to desire in documentary scholarship and establish how the expectations and assumptions that permeate the production, reception and critique of documentary are based in an emotional attachment to the form. I also outline the key propositions that underpin my approach, such as the role of object relations, the sociality of the emotions and the manner in which emotions can be perceived to work through documentary texts.

Focusing the emotions

To align documentaries with emotions such as pleasure, care, pain or disgust is to reference a number of epistemological questions that extend beyond the immediate concerns of film and media. There exists a long-standing opposition between feeling and thinking in Western thought and in the popular imagination. For some time, sectors of the humanities have been concerned with dismantling this perceived opposition. In this spirit Isobel Armstrong writes, ‘the power of affect needs to be included within a definition of thought and knowledge rather than theorised outside them, excluded from the rational’ (87). Documentary’s discourses of sobriety can be easily regarded as promoting the educative and