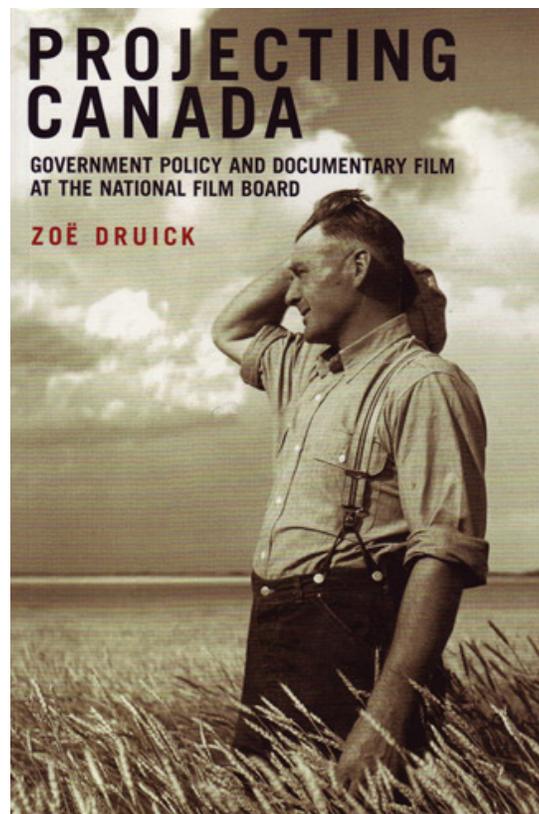


Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board
(McGill-Queens University Press, 2007)

Zoë Druick

Review by Ezra Winton



Recently I was at the National Film Board's Montreal facility for a meeting, and walking the hallowed halls of that sprawling labyrinth I was taken aback to see the cover of Zoë Druick's new book stuck to a tack board outside of the archives room. Hadn't Druick stuck the screws to the board with this bellicose book? But there it was, modestly set amongst book covers of more prosaic historical interpretations of the NFB. It was, perhaps, an example of the

complex and contradictory spaces that the Board constructs and communicates – the kinds of spaces Druick astutely excises from the messy tangle of Canadian cultural policy, discourse, and production in her new book, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*.

Projecting Canada is a perceptive navigation of the complex and contradictory spaces of Canada's enduring documentary film institution. Druick writes in an accessible, straight-forward style, marked by clarity of language, openness of ideas, and a firm foundation of research that revisits and uncovers mountains of musty archival documents. It is also a welcome addition to a growing body of knowledge around Canada's cultural industries -- and the NFB in particular -- that too often tends toward either reductionist political economy or romantic historical revisionism. This is not to say that other works fail to complicate the terrain of Canadian cultural policy and production -- Dorland's excavations of the discursive policy imaginaries in *So Close to the State/s* come to mind -- but it is refreshing to read a book-length historical treatment of the NFB that wears its cultural studies bias on its sleeve. While the NFB may not be a cultural industry per se, Druick suggests it remains a stalwart in Canada's "symbolic environment" and has as much to do with citizenship as it does with holding up a mirror to Canadian life. Whether it is an imagined life of multiculturalism, or the 'real', lived life of difference, is a distinction questioned by Druick throughout the text.

Projecting Canada is an intervention into both established histories of one of Canada's most revered institutions and accepted readings of some of the NFB's most celebrated films. Druick's analyses refreshingly balance aesthetic considerations from film studies with an emphasis on cultural context most often found in cultural studies. For those who love the NFB, this book should inspire second and third viewings of the catalogue; for those who don't share this positive outlook, *Projecting Canada* delivers a well-deserved blow to what some consider to be a redundant and wasteful government institution. The tone of Druick's interrogation of the Board rests somewhere between a critical carpet bombing and an archivist's reserved appreciation.

In her introduction, Druick makes a convincing argument for the dovetailing lineages of social science research methodologies and documentary practice. Citing the work of scores of social scientists and documentary theorists, Druick proposes a marriage of social science and documentary film for the purpose of analyzing and critiquing cultural policy concerned with empire and nation-building. *Projecting Canada* reveals the often unexamined relationship between government objectives and the legacy of its cultural artefacts. The NFB and its filmmaking activities are viewed from the perspective of the policy and memoranda produced by self-serving, eugenic governments eager to use the powers of film to educate, assimilate, and manage the masses. These historical

spaces are decoded by Druick through the lens of 'governmentality.' Druick points to each era of the Board's history as mildly differentiated yet connected parts of a larger project of liberalism and modernity. After a brief consideration of existing literature on the subject, she rhetorically asks, "What more is there to be said?" The tendencies of liberal democracy, such as multiculturalism and the welfare state apparatus, are served by commandeering the art and craft of documentary, and developing "government realism" -- a formulaic form of filmmaking that combines social sciences and technology for purposes of "knowing and regulating the population." Druick argues that while this kind of filmmaking is the "technology of social science," social science is in turn "the technology of liberal democracy."

By threading together histories of human knowledge and cultural production, Druick offers a new perspective on an old institution. Each chapter begins with a discussion of the various discursive formations of a government in need of both management and assimilation mechanisms, and an artistic pool able to supply the tools of this. The latter portion of each chapter explores the interplay between these components through a selective reading of NFB films. Canadian governments, always in need of understanding, measuring, quantifying and categorizing populations, have found bedfellows in NFB filmmakers. These filmmakers have served as perfunctory agents of the state by travelling into the darker spaces of society to communicate the social realities of 'the nation' back to the elite charged with continuing and consolidating said nation. Druick invokes Paul Starr when she explains "[...] measuring – or indeed documenting – the population may actually help to produce it." At times, her argument connects with early theorists of the culture industries, specifically Adorno and Horkheimer. However, it is not the audiences that are the "dupes" in this interrogation of cultural practices, but rather the filmmakers. Druick outlines her discovery of struggles and dialogues "between competing voices and claims on documentary truth" that remain "embedded in NFB films." And while she actively skewers some of the most sacred texts in the NFB catalogue (and does so with sincerity and precision) she seeks to avoid the narrow and myopic approach to film text as "final word." Druick also wishes to avoid slipping into a determinist zone where films are mere "mouthpieces" of the state, clearly embracing the critical cultural studies perspective of textual polysemy. Nonetheless, this reader feels the intention of the filmmakers is mysteriously absent from the discussion.

After exploring several periods that illustrate ruptures of nationalism, internationalism, regionalism, and immigration-assimilation within NFB output, Druick turns to the most infamous period of the Board's history: the era that saw the launch and subsequent demise of the Challenge for Change program (and its French-language counterpart, Société nouvelle). The Challenge for

Change films endeavoured to take on poverty, marginalization, racism and other social issues through documentary. By giving communities the media tools to “tell their own stories,” it was thought access to media would facilitate change. The contradictions, problems, and counter-effects of these often romanticized ‘radical’ philosophies are well-documented by Druick who gestures towards a much needed re-consideration of the program. It is suggested these good-intentioned NFB filmmakers tackled the diverse publics and concomitant problems of Canada at the time, only to supply governments with raw data in a way of census work.

In the final sections of the text, Druick turns to the absorption of counter-publics into the Canadian nation and the NFB focusing specifically on women, First Nations people, Quebec sovereigntists, and queer communities. An important insight proffered here concerns the trope of struggling communities overcoming adversity by appealing to government agencies for guidance or assistance. After describing a scene detailing an example of this guidance in *In Her Chosen Field* (1989), Druick suggests “This is a good example of the film depicting a normative narrative where community needs are met through government policy.” Indeed, Druick’s interpretation of the NFB is one of a government agency depicting normative narratives on behalf of corresponding governments. It is a striking culture-first examination of a complex institution usually researched ‘by the numbers.’

In the end, Druick carries out an original and provocative intellectual task, locating documentary practice, social sciences, and cultural policy within the larger framework of Western liberalism and modernity. In doing so, Druick makes a substantial contribution to film studies in Canada that will provide future cultural theorists discursive spaces previously not on offer. Her parting observations are sober, critical intonations of an institution that she sees as an articulation of governmentality. Writing in her closing remarks, “The NFB has gone from being a dynamic part of the process of imagining Canadian society to an archive of government in the welfare state,” Druick does not pretend to have a new vision for the Board. Questions of citizenship still plague the state, and thus plague the NFB. However, while Druick describes continual cultural crises as a defining characteristic of Canada’s modernity project, she leaves open the door for imagining cultural policy and cultural practices that include expansive and challenging definitions of ‘citizenship.’ As for the beleaguered NFB, it hasn’t closed its doors yet...