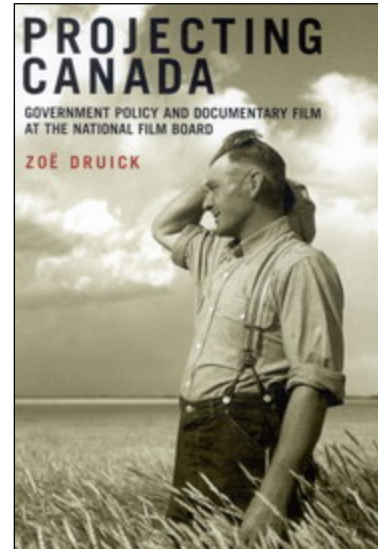


Zoë Druick, **Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board**, McGill University Press, Montreal, 256 pp., 2007, \$80.00 (hardcover), \$27.95 (paperback).

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The title of Zoë Druick's *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* is evocative of the government mandate that brought the Canadian National Film Board (NFB) into being. That mandate, the Canadian National Film Act of 1939, stated that the objective of the NFB would be to "help Canadians in all parts of Canada to understand the ways of living and problems of Canadians in other parts." Indeed, since 1939 to the present, the NFB has depicted everyday Canadian life in productions that have been shown both domestically and abroad in an effort to achieve this goal. Yet beyond specifying the book's national focus and its object of study — the NFB-produced documentaries of everyday life in Canada — the title, with its transitive verb "projecting," also suggests the work these films performed in projecting a united Canadian polity. By unifying through images Canadians across regional and cultural divides, the NFB assimilated First Nations, Inuit, and Métis; Quebec sovereignists and federalist nationalists; and, especially in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, women, "visual minorities," and youth within the Canadian nation state.



Writing from the perspective of "governmentality" — that is, drawing upon the late work of French theorist Michel Foucault on the management of the conduct of populations by governmental regimes, including but not limited to states — Druick emphasizes "film acts," a phrase that refers equally to the work performed by NFB documentaries in shaping the conduct of the Canadian populace and to the cultural policies that have steered the NFB since its inception, from the Film Act of 1939 to the *National Film and Video Policy* of 1984. Druick contends that NFB documentaries have operated and continue to operate as a technology of liberal governance: Like statistics in the social sciences, and related strategies for visualizing populations (charts, bar and line graphs, etc.), NFB documentaries collectively form an apparatus for visualizing the Canadian populace to probabilistically predict and thus better govern its behaviors. This is as true of the auto-ethnographic, performative, and participant-action NFB documentaries of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, as well as of films that ostensibly criticize Canadian government policy, as it is of the staid social hygiene films of the 1940s and 1950s. Druick argues that shifts in NFB documentary aesthetics and narrative strategies are irreducibly interconnected with paradigm shifts in anthropology and the social sciences. Although both have experienced epistemological crises, they continue to operate as technologies of predictive population assessment and management.

Nevertheless, Druick does not suggest that NFB documentary films merely translate the univocal voice of the Canadian welfare state into film form. Rather, in her introduction, Druick draws upon the literary criticism of M. M. Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva in theorizing NFB documentaries as dialogic or intertextual. Not only does Druick note the capacity of the viewer to engage with and interpret NFB films in ways that exceed the intentions of their producers, she also observes that, because the production of a NFB documentary is shaped by the input of many participants — directors, scriptwriters, actors, and non-actors, in addition to technocratic social reformers, social scientists, and government policy writers — the films are structured by the competing objectives, conflicts, and struggles of a variety of cultural producers. Citing the work of social historians Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, Druick suggests that, despite the tendency of NFB documentaries to delimit through a social scientific framing, the peoples and voices represented in, say, a film on the cultural mores of the Canadian Inuit, marginalized voices do come through on the screen.

Druick argues that the films of the NFB reflect the conflicts and contradictions of the liberal welfare state. Rather than allow for sweeping social and political change, the Canadian welfare state, like other Western liberal welfare states, is accommodationist; it emerged in its 20th century instantiation in response to political struggles by labor, women, and minorities for broad social reform. Yet rather than facilitate such reform, it provided limited social services as a bulwark against more radical change. Thus, political struggle, conflict, and contestation can be understood as a constitutive part of the Canadian welfare state's liberal governmental regime. Similarly, NFB documentaries, particularly of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, accommodated the demands of women, "visual minorities," and other marginalized citizens by addressing issues of economic and social inequality. The NFB even allowed such "problem" citizens to produce films themselves. Yet in so doing, it assimilated them within the projected unity of the Canadian nation, thus fortifying the state's liberal governmental regime and abetting its effort to defer broad, systematic engagement with the social and political demands of disenfranchised groups.

Rather than understand the various crises that befell the NFB as moments of institutional and aesthetic failure or lack, Druick assays these moments, occurring both at the level of shifting state governmental objectives and also in terms of documentary aesthetics and narrative strategies, as sites of the NFB's continued productivity. In emphasizing the continuity of the NFB project, while also acknowledging the constitutive role of moments of crisis and rupture, Druick's approach to NFB history is genealogical. For although the book's chapters proceed roughly chronologically, Druick's historiographic intervention is not to argue the value of a linear chronology of the NFB. Indeed, such a chronology is called into question by the many instances within chapters in which she breaks away from the historical moment at hand to appeal to an earlier time or prior historical incident for its explanatory power. Instead, Druick's goal is to argue the continuity of the NFB's efforts to produce visual representations of populations. For despite the challenges posed to it from, on the one hand, neoliberals and the conservative Right, and on the other, Feminism, "visual minorities," and the radical Left, Druick argues that the NFB has continued to function as an apparatus for visualizing and managing populations.

Despite the national specificity of her project, Druick complicates the idea of the stable, bounded nation by demonstrating the protean character of the Canadian nation state and the ways in which governmental knowledges migrate, disregarding national borders. For instance, the second chapter,

"Empire Communications and Documentary Film," problematizes the fixed borders of the state by linking NFB governmental objectives in its earliest years to those of the British Empire through the figure of John Grierson, characterized in "great man" historiographic narratives as the progenitor of both the British Documentary [Film] Movement and the NFB. Druick suggests that Grierson was deployed by the British government to Canada to perpetuate the "imperial preference" (that is, a preference for British-made consumer goods) among the colonies and dominions of the British Empire. In the third chapter, "Government Documentary Film and Social Science," she suggests that, as a result of his sociological training at the University of Chicago, Grierson brought with him the epistemological assumptions of American social science with regard to populations, and that he translated these assumptions into British Documentary and NFB film narrative and aesthetic strategies — what Druick refers to in all its myriad instantiations as "government realism." Despite Druick's calling into question the "great man" approach to histories of the NFB, Grierson remains central to her narrative because, as she acknowledges, he provides a crucial link between Empire Communications and the social sciences. Indeed, it is through the figure of Grierson that Druick is able to problematize the nation state as a fixed category in the NFB's earlier years.

Throughout her book, Druick is attentive to the dispersion of governmentality throughout and beyond the Canadian nation state, both at the macro-levels of Canada's place in international affairs and global markets, and at the micro-level of the minds and bodies of citizens. (With regard to the latter, see especially her discussion of the relationship between the social science of Charles E. Merriam — Grierson's adviser at Chicago — eugenics, and NFB mental health and hygiene films). Because Druick acknowledges the variegated levels at which governmental power operates, her work contributes to efforts in contemporary cultural studies to rethink the relationship between local, national, and global phenomena. For instance, in the fourth chapter, "Nationalism and Internationalism at the National Film Board," Druick counters the assumption that nationalism and internationalism are necessarily antithetical terms. Discussing both the NFB's contributions to UNESCO in the 1940s to the 1960s, as well as the commonality of objectives of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (Massey Commission) with regard to NFB documentaries being shown both domestically and abroad, Druick suggests that the governmental objective of the postwar Canadian welfare state began to expand beyond the nation's borders in the Cold War period. With the modification of the National Film Act in 1950, she notes, "The NFB was now mandated to produce and distribute films 'designed to interpret Canada to Canadians *and to other nations*,'" suggesting that not only domestic, but also international populations were constituted as subjects of liberal democratic regimes, such as that of the Canadian welfare state ( p. 91, emphasis added).

Druick argues that the self-reflexivity and performativity of NFB documentary film in the last three decades of the 20th century does not mark a radical departure from earlier NFB documentary forms and objectives. Rather, just as 1940s NFB documentaries embodied traditional, positivist social scientific epistemology and statistical knowledge, so do auto-ethnographic, "postmodern" NFB documentaries of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s embody the epistemology of experimental ethnographic inquiry and self-reflexive social science. Thus, experimental or postmodern NFB documentary film is defined by Druick as, like its predecessors, exemplary of the government realist aesthetic. "The National Film Board was born in a moment of crisis," asserts Druick. ". . . It seems odd to suggest, as many do, that the scientific epistemology of modernity has only recently been challenged" (p. 183). Positing that perpetual crisis is

perhaps the defining characteristic of modernity, Druick again argues against an interpretation of crises — in documentary film form, in culture, and in the liberal state — as moments of failure or lack; rather, she proposes that such crises be construed as instances of continuation and productivity.

The interpretation of crises in terms of productivity has political significance, for it is by construing the NFB documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s according to their productivity for the state that Druick criticizes the films in terms of “aesthetic multiculturalism.” In her discussion of the *Reel Diversity* program (instituted in 1996), to which “emerging filmmakers of color” are invited to enter short films, Druick argues that, in limiting the subject of eligible films’ to issues of racial identity, the program:

restricts filmmakers of visible minorities to the fact of their visibility as a marker of difference, without examining the *causes* of racism or issues of transnational migration, or the way in which racial difference and multicultural discourse functions for dominant groups or white Canadians. (p. 175)

Indeed, Druick suggests that there exists a commonality between the 1940s NFB documentary strategy of typification (indebted to the statistical concepts of “representativeness” and probability) and the segmentation of contemporary Canadian society into various, manageable minority groups in the social imaginary projected by more recent NFB documentary film. Typification, Druick argues, was facilitated not only through the casting of non-actors and the use of single-story narratives representative of statistical norms, but also through strategies of nontheatrical exhibition. By targeting specific social groups — women’s auxiliary clubs, rotary clubs, children’s church groups, and synagogues — nontheatrical exhibitions of NFB documentaries of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s addressed the Canadian populace in socially stratified groups, targeting them in a manner not dissimilar to the segmentation of “problem” or “minority” citizens through late 20th century NFB documentary films.

As Druick notes, although her project spans the entirety of the NFB’s 20th century history, “In order to examine the particular dialogue about social science, population, and government heard in and through the production of NFB films,” some aspects of the Board’s history have been deemphasized (p. 14). *Projecting Canada* is therefore best approached not as a comprehensive history of the NFB, but rather as a case study of a particular cultural form from the perspective of governmentality. Druick addresses NFB documentary film in an effort to assay the role of visual culture within a particular governmental regime — that is, the liberal regime of the Canadian welfare state. Yet this is precisely why her book’s relevance extends beyond the Canadian context. For although non-Canadian scholars may be unfamiliar with some of the names and details of 20th century Canadian government and cultural policy that the book discusses, *Projecting Canada’s* assertion that NFB documentary films have acted and continue to act in the service of the liberal state is valuable to anyone interested in the governmental functions of visual culture.



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