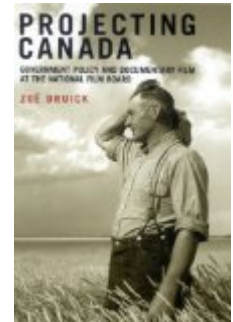


Zoe Druick. *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. 244 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-3259-5.



Reviewed by Howard Fremeth

Published on H-Canada (March, 2008)

Based on her dissertation completed at York University's Department of Social and Political Thought, *Projecting Canada* represents a strong entry for Zoe Druick into the academic field of Canadian communication studies. Not only is the book reflective of the debates and concerns during the growth of this relatively young field in the 1990s, but it also encapsulates some of the unique proclivities and approaches of Canadian communication scholars. Specifically, it fits into cultural policy studies of the mid- and late-1990s that incorporated Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to examine cultural policy as a citizen-building technology. Generally, the book fits into the historical fascination, some may say obsession, of Canadian communication scholars with the federal government's policies over culture, communication, and technology.

This fascination with government agencies and crown corporations, such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the National Film Board (NFB), and the Canadian Radio-Telecommunication Commission (CRTC), takes on a contradictory character and dialectical approach in Canadi-

an communication studies.[1] On the one hand, these government interventions are applauded for the democratic potential of enhancing or creating a noncorporate public sphere. On the other hand, since these are government interventions, many scholars criticize such efforts for negating the radical potential of a public sphere that is free from both the market and the state.

The tension between the radical democratic potential and institutionalized government appropriation underlies Druick's historical study of the NFB's documentary film production. It is important to contextualize this book within Canadian communication scholarship, because the book is not so much a history of NFB documentary filmmaking as it is an attempt to theorize the NFB's purpose and historical role as a citizen-building technology. Although it may seem commonsense that the NFB provides this pedagogical function for the Canadian state considering it was created as an information and propaganda service during World War II, Druick's theoretical argument provides an answer to why this institution continues to exist especially during times of political crisis.

However, unlike the work of Henry Mintzberg, the famed Canadian management professor, who answers this question from an institutional strategy perspective in *Tracking Strategies: Toward a General Theory* (2007), Druick uses her expertise in cultural studies and film studies by linking the aesthetics, style, and narratives of NFB documentary films with the shifting political and cultural strategies of the state. She labels this tactic "government realism." This documentary filmmaking technique is always useful for fulfilling the NFB's mandate by portraying "typical yet anonymous people and places crafted into allegories of citizen and nation building" (p. 98).

The first chapter defines the concept of "government realism" in a manner that links the book's two major themes: first, the relationship between the guiding epistemologies of social science and the techniques of documentary filmmaking; and second, the NFB's continual sense of crisis in the face of criticism by politicians and its ability to redefine itself according to new governmental concerns. In other words, the subjects that NFB documentary films portray and the techniques in which they are filmed alter depending on changes to the sociopolitical context and the current epistemologies in social science. However, the constant is that the films always portray Canadian subjects in a manner and style that is consistent with the prevailing epistemology. This argument organizes the book's remaining six chapters by dividing NFB documentary filmmaking history into separate historical periods that relate to different prevailing epistemologies and sociopolitical contexts.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the development of the NFB before its official establishment in 1939. Whereas chapter 2 analyzes the historical context that led up to the creation of the NFB, chapter 3 examines the relationship between the prevailing epistemology of that time and the documentary filmmaking aesthetic that would eventually be appropriated by the NFB. John Grierson, the first

commissioner of the NFB, acts as a convenient figure for Druick to link the book's two themes. First, she argues that Grierson, who worked for Britain's Empire Marketing Board (EMB) which used film during the interwar years as a form of empire communications to promote harmony in the commonwealth, would eventually export this pedagogical use of film to Canada and enshrine it into the NFB's founding parliamentary act. Second, she argues that not only did Grierson export this British tradition using film for education, but he also exported the prevailing American epistemology of social science that influenced the style of NFB documentary filmmaking. Grierson, who studied at the University of Chicago under Robert Park and Charles Merriam, incorporated epistemological and methodological techniques of the Chicago School of Sociology to produce films that emphasized the wholeness of society by looking at its subset of social types.

The rest of the book traces the history of the NFB by focusing on different historical periods that are characterized by social transition and political crisis. Each period begins with a sense of urgency and ends with the NFB adapting to the political or social transition; however, never changing throughout this process is the aesthetic and narrative technique of "government realism," which may be adapted to suit the prevailing epistemology, but retains its focus on national unity. In chapter 4, the NFB survives the late 1940s Red Scare, which implicated Grierson as a communist, by drawing help from the nationalistic education lobby and connecting the institution to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) projects aimed at global social and cultural harmony. Chapter 5 recounts the institutional transition of the NFB into the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration during the 1950s and early 1960s. In this period, the NFB played a vital governmental role integrating difficult social types: namely, aboriginals, immigrants, and, to a lesser degree, youth.

Chapters 6 and 7 are two of the more interesting chapters not only for updating the literature on the NFB by looking at the post-1960 period, but also for examining one of the most challenging eras for state-sponsored cultural production. Chapter 6 begins with the NFB's dominance over national visual production being undermined by a shift in the government's desire to fund educational filmmaking and to move into such new areas as private broadcasting partnerships and funding feature film projects. However, the NFB was able to reposition itself with the creation of the Challenge for Change project. Challenge for Change fits nicely into Druick's overall argument. On the one hand, by giving disenfranchised groups knowledge and access to filmmaking, the NFB served to connect these New Left and identity politics social movements to the government. As a result, the NFB was in line with the new government policies of the late 1960s that encouraged women, aboriginals, immigrants, and youth to connect with the larger political process. On the other hand, this project brought in a new filmmaking technique with the filmmaker now becoming an explicit part of the documentary by being in direct dialogue with the film's subjects or even being the subject of the film. By eschewing the traditional NFB aesthetic of an omnipresent narrator attempting to objectively and anthropologically recount a story, this new approach was more in line with the prevailing social science epistemology that was beginning to acknowledge the partial and particularistic role of the researcher. Chapter 7 traces this process into the 1980s and 1990s when, even with the rise of federal fiscal conservatism, the NFB continued to find governmental support.

Overall, Druick posits a cogent and interesting argument that links aesthetic and political theory to survey the history of NFB documentary filmmaking. With that said, for a historian approaching this book, there may be some points of criticism. First, the book depends almost entirely on government documents and archival research,

which is not supported by any interviews with NFB personnel or audiences. The question of how these films were interpreted by the intended audience—Canadian citizens—needs to be addressed if one wants to judge the films' pedagogical efficacy. One of the only times the audience is heard from in the book is a brief but interesting quotation from a student's letter to the NFB. The elementary student thanked the NFB for learning about the trials and tribulation of Canada's First Nations people in the documentary *No Longer Vanishing* (1955). Second, since the book starts from a theoretical position, a historian may have difficulty with how Druick constructs her project. In fact, the book's topic that exclusively focuses on documentary filmmaking is useful for fitting into Druick's attempt to link social science epistemologies with filmmaking techniques, yet it ignores the citizen education function of fictitious short or feature films and animated films aimed at children. More to the point, the term "documentary film" may also be misleading in a historical sense. Perhaps a better term than "documentary films" is "nonfiction" films. However, even this term does not cover all the films examined considering the book still mentions some fictitious films, such as Norman McLaren's world famous animated film, *Neighbours* (1952). The early NFB films on such subjects as education on Canadian laws and customs for immigrants or sexual health education for teenagers by today's standards are closer to sexual health videos found in university health centers or employee training videos than they are to contemporary documentary films.

Despite some criticism as to how the project is constructed, *Projecting Canada* is valuable to both Canadian historians and communication scholars. Druick opens up the question of why the federal government has played such a direct role in cultural production. She challenges previous scholars who claimed that government intervention in culture has led to an absent public sphere. Druick repositions this argument of absence by claiming that the NFB may have had shown some signs of

an oppositional public sphere, but this was done in a controlled setting that absorbed and neutralized the radical element. Therefore, at the crux of this book lie two related issues: authentic versus inauthentic public spheres and the question of whether media representation leads to political representation and empowerment. Wisely, Druick is relatively neutral on these issues. However, after reading *Projecting Canada* it is clear that what one thinks of these issues will affect whether one considers the NFB and similar state-sponsored cultural institutions as progressive or conservative.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Robert Babe, *Telecommunications in Canada: Technology, Industry, and Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); Richard Collins, *Culture, Communication, and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); David Taras, *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1999); and Dallas Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada* (Norwood: Ablex Publishing, 1981).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Howard Fremeth. Review of Druick, Zoe. *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14265>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.