
It is customary to date the emergence of the Canadian government’s feature filmmaking policy from the establishment in 1968 of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC), with its original one-time grant of “a miserable 10 million dollars.” All of the contradictions and ambiguities surrounding the very existence of a Canadian film industry can be found in the CFDC (now Telefilm Canada) as an institution, which was created to help establish a private, commercially viable, film industry, and was soon asked to perform the miracle of also making a contribution to national cultural life in the manner of other state cultural bodies such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or the National Gallery. Industry versus art; cultural nationalism versus the commercial, the saleable, the popular: these apparent antinomies framing the discourse surrounding Canadian cinema have almost always been seen as the result of the Canadian state’s problem in dealing with a domestic feature filmmaking industry.

But as Michael Dorland’s superb recent book shows, this received account of the “sudden” appearance of the Canadian state in the realm of feature film production belies a long history of nascent considerations on this topic by various state agencies and ministries. Somewhat less concerned with the theoretical matters of media effect and cultural imperialism than Ted Magder’s—also excellent—Canada’s Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films (1993), a book with which it shares many central concerns, here Dorland’s inquiry is into the more specific questions of how, where, and in what ways the state policy apparatus virtually conjured up a particular idea of a Canadian feature film industry, then proceeded to develop concrete policy to bring life to this beast as if Dr. Frankenstein with a lightning flash. That the object itself was a creation of what Dorland calls an “economy of talk” is certainly a revelation. Then to ask, as Dorland does, for what reasons and in what corridors of power it was decided that a state policy to create a feature film industry was in the interests of the state, is to ask the perfect questions, since innumerable other film or cultural policies could certainly have been pursued. Dorland sets himself the task of unraveling just what exactly it was about feature filmmaking as a cultural and industrial practice which so appealed to those involved with state policy. Addressing the historiography, criticism, and practice of the Canadian cinema—both French and English—in the period from the 1950s to the present, the book’s central focus is on the formation of the policy field which resulted in the state’s ongoing engagement with feature filmmaking. It is a narrative with both predictable and surprising aspects: we naturally encounter elitism and cultural nationalism, but also Dorland’s provocative insights into effects of changing production practices related to the introduction of Canadian television and the effects of Quiet Revolution on the conjuring up of a phantom “Canadian Film Industry” well before it was reasonable to talk of such a beast.

Adopting Foucault’s theory of “governmentality”—a concept specifically concerned with the discursive arrangements of policy and the procedures and means of the deployment of state power—Dorland illustrates the processes by which the twin discourse of private motion picture producers and those of state agencies (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and National Film Board of Canada) inadvertently resulted in a variety of confusions and false assumptions which ultimately framed the entire discourse of the policy field. Surveying both presently existing studies of Canadian film history, and the previous attempts at theorizing and analyzing the relationships between the state and filmmaking in Canada—attempts which, Magder’s aside, Dorland argues have generally been mired in a governamentalty of their own—So Close to the State/s proceeds to chronicle in striking detail the discussions and the arguments, both public and private, among “culturecrats” and largely quiescent private producers throughout the 1950s and 1960s which led to a particu-
larly limited Canadian feature film industry, and the ultimate creation of agencies and pol-

Among the book’s many strengths, perhaps the most laudable is the enormous amount of essential primary research it represents. One of Dorland’s main arguments is that not only has there been an egregious disconnect between what he calls political knowledge and academic knowledge about the actual mechanics of feature filmmaking in Canada—that is between policymakers and scholars—but also that concrete policy decisions themselves have frequently been made based on “ludicrous misconceptions of basic facts” (p. 148). As well, primary research needs analysis and here, too, Dorland’s book shines, for the application of Foucault’s notion of governmentality allows Dorland to see the state not simply as either an instrument of misapplied or failed—or, conversely, of “successful”—policy initiatives, but as “a complex, contested, and changing articulation of the practices of the techniques of governance in interaction with new fields of knowledge, particularly those of the social or human sciences” (p. 21).

This book manages a rare and satisfying feat: the narrative of the creation of a policy field in which a feature filmmaking industry becomes a desirable goal of the state is told with scintillating detail (a result of extensive archival research and several interviews with “culturecrats” from all concerned public agencies and from private industry) combined with agreeable storytelling finesse. No, there’s no “suspense,” per se, but the formation of this policy field does make a fascinating story even for the non-specialist in Canadian film studies or cultural policy. Replete with citations from government reports, internal documents, memos, correspondence from the NFB archives and elsewhere, So Close to the State/s reveals the inner workings of the policy machinery grinding—in the case of feature film policy—in isolation from germane facts and clearly under the influence of governmentality. The rigorous research behind this work may be its most important contribution.

One perhaps curious absence in this work is any sustained attention to the films themselves. Of course the book is not primarily (or even peripherally) concerned with Canadian films as texts, or as anything other than as objects of policy formation, but the relative paucity of individual films (or, for that matter, *groups* of film, such as those largely unseen hundreds produced during the 1978-82 “tax-shelter boom”) is still surprising, even given the book’s own focus, since in some cases it has been individual works which have contributed to the propulsion of state policy, or at the very least to the discourses surrounding state policy. For example, consider the recent flap over *Bubbles Galore*, Cynthia Roberts’ extremely sexually explicit lesbian-themed feature film which received most of its production budget from various government funding agencies, a fact which caused shocked indignation in the pages of the *National Post*, and among many members of the House of Commons. While not directly having an impact upon state policy (that is, assuming we can take Canada Council chair Jean-Louis Roux at his word when he says—contrary to Sheila Copps’ outburst calling for a review of the Canada Council’s adjudication principles—that no such re-evaluation is necessary or under consideration), the *Bubbles Galore* case reminds us of several historical examples of individual films entering into public debate because of their intersection with the state policy apparatus. For the most famous incident, back in 1972, Claude Fornier’s notorious soft-core hit *Deux femmes en or* raised howls of protest over the state’s funding of what became known as “maple syrup porno,” an incident unremarked upon here.

The third major work of the decade on the Canadian feature film industry (a topic which necessarily includes the Canadian state as a major player)—the previous two being Magder’s aforementioned book from 1993 and Manjunath Pendakur’s gravely economist *Canadian Dreams and American Control* from 1990—So Close to the State/s enters into debates on various matters in Canadian film studies beyond those strictly concerned with
policy. This is to say that because Dorland’s argument about the emergence of feature filmmaking does directly address certain critical matters—such as the questions of voice and language among Québécois cineastes, and of prescriptive critical pronouncements on the “failures” of Canadian feature filmmakers—then it should be seen as well as a useful corrective to a certain tendency of Canadian criticism to, in Dorland’s terms, write about an imagined Canadian cinema—one which critics and scholars wished would be, but was not actually, in existence.

In the end, Dorland’s text performs another magic trick. By declining to declare prescriptions for what “ought” to have been Canadian feature filmmaking policy, the book winds up as exactly what it wants to be: “a contribution to ‘thick’ policy analysis” (p. ix). The scholarship of both Canadian film studies and of cultural policy needs more books like this one. Elsewhere, Dorland has been instrumental in creating supremely useful texts such as The Canadian Cultural Industries (1996), and in So Close to the State/s: The Emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy, while not as strictly “useful” as a teaching text as the previous anthology, Dorland’s meticulous research and insightful analysis result in a great step forward for the scholarship of Canadian film culture.

References

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