Within the field of Canadian historical film studies—a terrain frequently on the periphery of scholarly interest—the National Film Board of Canada has nevertheless found itself the focus of a considerable amount of attention. Given that its undeniable presence seems permanently embedded in the cultural fabric of the nation, it should perhaps come as no surprise that as a topic of study, it boasts what is perhaps the most developed body of scholarly literature within this admittedly somewhat marginalized field. Zoë Druick’s *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* represents the latest contribution to the ongoing dialogue regarding the NFB’s status as a cultural institution in Canada, and it is a welcome and much-needed addition to this particular subfield.

*Projecting Canada* had its genesis in Druick’s dissertation research at York University and has since been expanded, reworked, and refocused, benefiting from further archival research and additional theoretical perspectives. A crucial distinction from previous histories and analyses of the film board that Druick’s work offers is her interest in Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which she argues is an entirely fitting framework for understanding the functionings of the NFB as a state-owned producer of documentary film. In this capacity, *Projecting Canada* is equally as relevant a contribution to the field of critical cultural policy studies, particularly the brand of analysis carved out by authors such as Tony Bennett, Toby Miller, and Ian Hunter.

Druick’s book is important because it not only works as a theoretical meditation on documentary film and the practice of governmentality, but also serves to fill in the considerable historical lacunae left vacant by previous histories of the NFB. This is certainly one of the book’s strongest points: its firm commitment to contextualization. Druick displays a keen grasp of the ideological currents that circulated throughout Canada and the rest of the world, which in varying degrees have impacted the board’s development. The NFB obviously did not emerge within a historical vacuum, nor was it solely a product of the immediate pre-war context, as the standard narrative typically relates. Druick reveals the historical circumstances that shaped its formation and subsequent development, from its initial gestation period and onwards in the decades since. The book functions as much as a history of these ideologies and cultures of thought as it does a specific history of the board.
Central to her analysis of the film board’s documentary output is the concept she develops of “government realism.” (So central is the concept that it was apparently the working title of the book, for certain university library catalogues for a brief prepublication period had it listed as such.) She applies this term to the style of filmmaking cultivated at the film board, which she argues was largely influenced by the dominant discourse of liberal democracy. Stylistically, “government realism” is characterized by such techniques as the interview and the representative sample, employed with the deliberate intent to “know and regulate” the population. Her intention throughout the book is to synthesize her largely archival, historical research with analyses of chosen films—effectively bringing context to text, as she describes it.

The book spans a considerable period of time: it begins at the very onset of the NFB and carries on, mostly chronologically, throughout its history, ending in the 1990s. This represents a full half-century of filmmaking and an output of some 10,000 films. Druick’s intention, therefore, is certainly not to provide some kind of comprehensive survey of the NFB’s catalogue—such a project would be nearly impossible by any standard. Nor is her intent to revisit, question, or interrogate the NFB’s classic canon of films. Instead, the book breaks down the NFB’s history into distinct eras to document how it engaged with and was informed by contemporary socio-cultural formations specific to each period, and how this interaction was subsequently reflected in its documentaries.

Another notable distinction in Druick’s work is her interpretation of the NFB’s various structural and ideological realignments over the years. Whereas previous histories of the NFB have often stressed the novelty of the board’s reorientations, such as the “radical departures” of the restructuring associated with the Challenge for Change and Société nouvelle movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Druick argues instead for an essential continuity of practice throughout the board’s history. As a state-owned institution, the NFB’s interest in population management has always been a central concern. In her analysis, shifts toward new filmmaking practices and structural re-organizations, she argues, were largely mere reflections of contemporary socio-cultural contexts, and the board’s actual activities consistently formed part of the overall project of governmentality.

Some of the book’s arguments on this topic do not hold together as well as others. That the citizenship films of the 1950s, with their appeals to “typicality,” constitute a noticeable process of governmentality is an entirely valid assessment. That more radically politicized films of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, for example, operate on the same continuum and constitute a similar project, as Druick seems to posit, is a claim that in certain instances is not as easily digestible. Noticeably absent from the book are the quirky anecdotes that have typified much of the existing literature of the NFB. One can hardly fault Druick for an omission of this nature, given the book’s stated intent. In fact, this is likely quite deliberate, given her implicit intent of avoiding the nostalgic tone that many of these histories tend to adopt. The result amounts to what is essentially a rather depersonalized and detached form of institutional analysis. This is by no means a criticism, and given the NFB’s status in Canada, certainly such an approach is not only warranted, but in fact long overdue.

Although certain cultural nationalists may flinch at the less than reverential tone, *Projecting Canada* is a timely intervention in the sphere of cultural policy studies, especially its relation to documentary film. The book’s relevance is particularly felt in the Canadian context, where, as Druick is quick to remark, the production of both cultural policy and documentary film has been unsurpassed.

*Peter Lester*

*Concordia*