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❖ **Zoe Druick — *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board***

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"...New Fields of Usefulness..."

From the introductory quote derived from the Department of Trade and Commerce's annual report of 1939-40, Zoe Druick proposes several important clues to the strategies she adopts in her history of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*:

- The relation of governance to documentary filmmaking in the Canadian national interest
- The practice of documentary filmmaking as an extension of liberal democratic state power in the service of its policy goals
- The activities of a state cultural institution and the realization of pragmatic impacts on the population it serves

Careful to distinguish her work (though with great respect) from other work in the field, Druick appears to be situating her work on the NFB as a corrective to the exclusion of the NFB in a definitive account of Canadian cultural industries (Dorlan 96). This exclusion is simultaneously excused (the NFB is not a cultural industry), and used, as a segue into the formative basis for this book's central argument: that the NFB is above all else a governmental filmmaking enterprise and that its *raison d'être* is most strongly tied to a social policy rationale and not to a cultural rationale.

The Canadian government's interest in forming the National Film Board is a programmatic interest; it wishes to influence the ethos of the "conduct" of the nation. Here, Druick is channelling Foucault on governmentality and the reference is an explicit one. Druick is keen to buttress this argument by connecting the philosophy of governance with empirical social science – a common form for the representation of society in the postwar period. For Druick, the NFB can be seen as a subset of the representational strategies practiced by governments. As noted by Druick, the British Department of Trade and Commerce expressed that the NFB at its inception had a huge potential in exploring "new fields of usefulness". Druick links these interests to the preoccupations that governments had in this period with biosocial engineering and social control.

**The key role of John Grierson**

The role played by John Grierson is Druick's second plank that consolidates the founding of the NFB. The particularity of the Canadian situation was marked by the appointment of Grierson to a key Committee (the Imperial Relations Trust Film Committee - IRT). With status in the recently formed (1932) British Film Institute, Grierson used his cachet as technical advisor of the IRT to visit Canada in 1938 with a mandate to investigate the state of Canadian filmmaking. This thrust by Grierson into Canada would be prescient. The visit itself resulted in the funding of the National Film Society of Canada to acquire British films for distribution and circulation in Canada. Further this initiative was tied not only to "marketing" Britain in Canada, it was seen as a way of unifying the disparate parts of Canada by giving Canada a greater presence in British newsreels – something Grierson notes was more successfully achieved by Australia due to "...superior quality and efficiency of supply..." (39) (It is interesting that Grierson's foray into Australia in 1940 also as IRT

functionary resulted in the creation of the Australian National Film Board (ANFB) but it did not have the impact that the NFB had in Canada internationally.)

### Three decades of film production

In the 1950s, contextualised by post WWII cold war politics, the examples that best illustrate this relationship are films relating to First Nations peoples and immigrants. In both cases the overriding interest is that of citizenship and so with both constituencies the value of assimilation and integration into Canadian life is the priority.

The 1960s marked a shift in the approaches adopted by NFB filmmakers. This period is the most celebrated by historians of the NFB because of the radical and groundbreaking moves that were innovated by filmmakers from within the NFB. The problem for Druick in developing the analysis of this period, is that there is a de-coupling that emerges not only from the Griersonian ethos in the context of governmentality but also in the documentary film aesthetic that emerged in this period in the form of the *Challenge for Change* films.

Druick cites the key works of this period (Fogo films, VTR St. Jacques, *Cree Hunters of Mistassini* and the significant Studio D films) that brought important breaks in the way films were made and how they engaged with their audience. Given the extraordinary period these films represent in which technological change in communications converged with socio-political change, it is not surprising that Druick's framing thesis does not fully accommodate the emergence and influence of the films nationally and internationally.

The third period of the 1980s and 1990s is one in which Druick is able to underline the consolidation of the diversity agenda for the NFB. With increasing globalised media and against the backdrop of continuing questions of its relevance in the televisual age, the films in this period explore the twin interests of First Nations and multiculturalism themes. Fully abandoning the Griersonian aesthetic, a subjectivity and autobiographical ethos comes to dominate many films. Even here, Druick insists that the Grierson agenda is still with these films in mounting the case for typification and the will towards social progress.

In a strident conclusion Druick rightly identifies continuity in the institutional lives of the NFB that has permitted a substantial archive to come in being. Less emphasised in Druick's argument but an important part of the NFB's history is the manner in which the Film Board has also maintained an awareness and understanding of new communication technologies. In the one reference to the contemporary web presence of the NFB, Druick criticises Citizenshift (an NFB sponsored advocacy networking site) for being "unclear about its mission" (183) – in other words for not defining the idea of citizenship – an echo of past ambiguous attempts in the earlier iterations of the same project. But Citizenshift is an excellent example of the NFB seeking its mandate in the new technologies of the Internet – struggling with the moral imperatives as always but doing it in a technologically intelligent manner – as a player with all the other web players who struggle to occupy this terrain. In this regard Citizenshift may be the NFB's most intelligent iteration of the citizen in a long time, one that continues the strong advocacy role that characterised *Challenge for Change* and one that will no doubt find its place in the ever-evolving grassroots media of the 21st century.

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