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Exposing the Digital Gaze: The NFBC and Vernacular Media in Contemporary Canadian Storytelling

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) as an institutional enabler of vernacular media in post-millennial Canadian storytelling. Through interactive projects such as *Bear 71* and *Do Not Track*, the NFBC supports grassroots responses to surveillance, ecological precarity, and datafication. These works engage power structures through participatory frameworks grounded in lived experience. The digital gaze anchors this analysis, highlighting how visibility, vulnerability, and civic presence emerge in digital space. *Bear 71* stages ecological surveillance as entanglement; *Do Not Track* exposes algorithmic structures of commodification. Situated within the Canadian aporetic condition – a structural dynamic of cultural multiplicity, institutional contradiction, and plural representation – the NFBC model sustains participatory media ecologies. By aligning storytelling with civic infrastructure, these works advance cultural democracy and foster enduring public engagement. This study informs Canadian Studies, media scholarship, and cultural policy.

KEYWORDS

National Film Board of Canada; vernacular media; digital gaze; participatory storytelling; Canadian aporetic condition; civic media; surveillance culture

1. Introduction

Public media institutions shape how civic life is imagined, accessed, and engaged. In the post-millennial period, the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) has emerged as a key enabler of digital civic storytelling, particularly through its Interactive Studio. This unit collaborates with artists, designers, and researchers to produce participatory works that address surveillance, environmental change, and the impact of algorithmic processes. These projects activate public discourse by emphasizing ethical design, relationality, and collective experience. Audiences become co-creators in vernacular media practices – those grounded in local knowledge, cultural memory, and shared experience (Rodriguez, 2001).

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This article approaches NFBC interactive storytelling through the lens of cultural democracy and digital governance. Platform design and interface architecture structure visibility, engagement, and co-authorship. Projects such as *Bear 71*, *Do Not Track*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, *Supreme Law*, *The Space We Hold*, and *A Journal of Insomnia* make systemic dynamics legible and engage users in interpretive work (Couldry & Curran, 2003). The analysis follows two through-lines: surveillance/displacement and Indigenous futurism and resurgence.

The concept of the digital gaze anchors this inquiry. It refers to algorithmic operations that collect, sort, and distribute information through commercial platforms shaped by proprietary logic (Bucher, 2018). These systems organize perception, assign visibility, and influence how users encounter narratives. Visibility becomes a precondition for recognition; content flows through predictive tags and evaluations aligned with platform metrics (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Cultural participation unfolds within these structures. Users extend platform architectures through affective and interpretive responses. Within this framework, the NFBC's interactive projects facilitate mediated vernacularity inside public institutions. They reconfigure the institutional interface as a space where vernacular expression becomes legible through co-authored storytelling, sensory design, and participatory engagement. These works do not define vernacular culture as oppositional to mainstream culture. Instead, they ground it in lived experience and civic reflection.

The NFBC's ability to sustain this work emerges from its federal mandate and public accessibility. As a publicly funded agency, it operates within a structural dynamic characterized by cultural diversity, economic constraints, and evolving expectations. These tensions form the Canadian aporetic condition – a term I use to describe the contradictions that shape national cultural institutions (Bessai, 2024). NFBC projects do not resolve this condition. They work within it. Their interactive design articulates contradiction through structure, interface, and engagement. Projects such as *Do Not Track* and *Supreme Law* exemplify how public-facing digital storytelling can generate durable forms of civic participation. These works address the public. Their impact emerges through resonance, reconsideration, and collective memory.

I approach Canada as an ongoing settler-colonial formation. Structural violence continues in law, land, and everyday governance; NFBC projects can surface these realities and convene publics, while the contradictions persist beyond the works themselves.

2. The NFBC as a cultural institution

The NFBC holds a distinct position as a public institution engaged in cultural production. Established under the 1939 National Film Act, it was mandated to interpret Canada to both domestic and international audiences through audiovisual

storytelling (James, 1977; Morris, 1989). This role expanded beyond wartime information to include public education, aesthetic innovation, and democratic engagement (Magder, 1993). The NFBC now supports works exploring identity, ecology, law, and data governance through collaborative authorship and formal experimentation (National Film Board of Canada, 2014). The NFBC facilitates public access to narratives and reflections through its institutional infrastructure. Its internal structure reflects commitments to regional diversity, linguistic duality, and civic relevance. These priorities shape its production model, which integrates cultural, educational, and technological fields. NFBC circulates across classrooms, archives, festivals, and digital platforms, linking personal experiences to collective discourse (Druick, 2007; Gittings, 2002).

As a federal agency, the NFBC operates inside the state structures that sustain settler-colonial relations. This position provides resources and reach and places the work within the very contradictions it examines. This mandate aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, a framework that describes how cultural institutions navigate tensions between sovereignty, pluralism, and economic constraint (Bessai, 2024). These dynamics persist; they remain active conditions that shape cultural life. NFBC projects render them perceptible through a participatory form and digital design. The resulting narratives foreground instability, inviting civic reflection. The aporetic condition becomes legible through curatorial framing, narrative structure, and accessibility practices. Contradiction is not avoided but becomes a site for engagement. This process reflects Albert Murray's concept of the stylization of experience, where human expression organizes conflict through rhythm, form, and improvisation (Murray, 2016). The NFBC supports this public stylization, enabling responses to crises without collapsing ambiguity into resolution.

Institutional history reveals multiple phases: state-directed propaganda, oppositional filmmaking, and technological experimentation (Evans, 1991; Waugh et al., 2010). These moments reshaped authorship, production, and the interaction between authors and their audiences. Current projects extend this legacy within digital environments shaped by platform economies and algorithmic mediation. The NFBC addresses these conditions by foregrounding design literacy, civic inquiry, and participatory engagement. It does not sidestep the complexity of its funding and mandate; it incorporates these pressures into its storytelling frameworks. Through this approach, audiences encounter layered histories, contested identities, and shifting political conditions. The NFBC uses its institutional position to sustain the civic role of public media in digital culture.

The next section examines vernacular media and the ethics of exposure, building on the NFBC's institutional logic to explore storytelling as a form of civic inquiry.

3. Vernacular media and the ethics of exposure

Vernacular media arise from community practices that challenge exclusion. These forms elevate the lived experience, local knowledge, and expressive accessibility over market-driven models (Rodriguez, 2001). Each narrative emerges from the conditions it addresses, relying on embodiment, relational insight, and improvisation to create modes of endurance.

In Canada, vernacular storytelling expands through collaboration with the NFBC's Interactive Studio (Darveau, 2014). This unit collaborates with artists, designers, and researchers to develop projects that explore environmental change, surveillance, and algorithmic systems (Allison & Mendes, 2012; Gaylor, 2015). These initiatives emphasize participatory authorship, aesthetic invention, and civic orientation. Each raises ethical questions about exposure, especially regarding how design and representation affect visibility. Interface elements, data frameworks, and platform conventions structure how subjects appear and how users engage (Andrejevic, 2007). Ethical storytelling constructs interpretive frameworks in which vulnerability, legibility, and complicity emerge. Exposure operates as a relational dynamic shaped by both technological design and structural power (Butler, 2004).

Bear 71 (Allison & Mendes, 2012) exemplifies this method. Its interface tracks a collared grizzly bear's movements through maps, footage, and geospatial cues. The project prompts users to reflect on the systems that generate visual access. As they explore, users become aware of their placement within a surveillant environment. *Do Not Track* (Gaylor, 2015) builds on this approach by incorporating users' data into the narrative. Each episode reveals how digital traces circulate through commercial systems. The changing tone and structure across episodes establish a reflective space for inquiry. This participatory model connects user awareness to the wider architecture of data capture.

These works frame the digital gaze as an institutional arrangement shaped by infrastructure and visual logic. Participation unfolds under asymmetric conditions, with exposure structured by design. The NFBC's mandate sustains projects that reject commercial mandates. This institutional grounding supports storytelling anchored in civic learning, interpretive complexity, and ethical attention. Vernacular media addresses cultural contradictions through reflexive practices. NFBC initiatives provide structural support for these approaches, enabling audiences to engage with systems of power through design and inquiry.

The following section continues this analysis by examining the digital gaze within a broader cultural and institutional context.

4. Digital gaze and algorithmic space

The digital gaze structures visibility, directs attention, and transforms the experience into data. Algorithmic operations produce this gaze by collecting, classifying, and

circulating information through proprietary systems embedded in commercial infrastructure (Bucher, 2018). These processes shape interactive environments and condition how users encounter stories, images, and discourse. Visibility enables recognition. Tags, metrics, and predictive classifications organize content circulation, aligning it with platform protocols and engagement logic (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Cultural participation emerges within these regulatory systems. Users follow content shaped by data profiles, performing interpretive and affective labour that extends platform architectures.

NFBC interactive projects respond by designing interfaces that emphasize intentionality, process, and relational understanding. *Do Not Track* (Gaylor, 2015) builds a self-reflexive interface that allows users to follow their data through advertising networks. The project centers its narrative on interaction, guiding participants through algorithmic operations made visible through structured engagement. *The Space We Hold* (Hsiung et al., 2017) adopts an ethical design centred on witness testimony. Survivors of wartime sexual violence speak through an interface that pauses before each sequence, prompting user reflection. The gaze operates as a mode of care structured by duration, restraint, and moral clarity. Responsibility emerges through interface design.

Algorithmic space encompasses not only data extraction but also the design systems that organize public interaction, including recommendation engines, platform constraints, and data hierarchies, which condition participation (Noble, 2018). NFBC projects intervene in these structures by offering open narrative environments grounded in ambiguity, reflection, and temporal engagement. These settings host interpretive publics formed through shared attention and civic orientation. The NFBC supports this work through collaborative authorship, accessible platforms, and civic-centred design principles. Interface elements foreground interpretive intention and narrative openness. These features distinguish NFBC storytelling from commercial digital systems. Participation becomes a product of institutional form and aesthetic structure.

The next section examines how NFBC functions to establish memory as a robust infrastructure that integrates digital storytelling with public reckoning and networked publics.

5. Public memory and networked affect

Public memory emerges through cultural practices, institutional narratives, and mediated expression. These elements shape access to history and belonging, guiding how societies understand continuity and change. In digital environments, memory appears through tags, timelines, fragments, and interaction. The past becomes searchable, sortable, and recombined across networks (van Dijck, 2007). Within these structures, affect functions as an organizing principle. Networked affect refers to emotion transmitted across platforms. It arises from digital content and interface

design, becoming legible through shares, likes, and views (Papacharissi, 2015). These flows shape attention and define emotional frames for memory. Narratives navigate the intersection of fact and emotion, shaping meaning in digital spaces.

The NFBC engages these dynamics through projects that foreground reflective affect. This design treats emotion as civic presence. *A Journal of Insomnia* builds an immersive interface from testimonies, ambient sound, and fragmentary visuals (Duverneix & Sweeney, 2012). It avoids exposition and generates atmosphere. Users navigate a non-linear space structured for introspection. Memory and affect converge as the project presents insomnia through anxiety, grief, and isolation. These conditions become perceptible through tone, rhythm, and opacity. The interface builds a public archive that resists simplification and sustains ambiguity.

Supreme Law continues this logic through interactive chapters, archival material, and educational modules (Cizek, 2019). Its design positions constitutional history within digital space as a form shaped by political struggle and public interpretation. Affect emerges through pacing, tone, and visual rhythm. Memory becomes active through encounter and inquiry.

The NFBC's public memory model supports interpretive multiplicity and temporal openness. Its projects cultivate a democratic ethos where storytelling enables engagement. This method aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, a structure marked by tensions within Canadian public culture shaped by settler colonialism, ecological precarity, and plural claims to recognition (Bessai, 2024). Memory, in this setting, becomes an ethical horizon. Networked affect can reinforce or unsettle engagement, depending on platform design. The NFBC's autonomy supports affective depth beyond commercial metrics. It enables narrative spaces for grief, care, resilience, and dissent. These affective registers root storytelling in civic life, shaping NFBC projects as digital architectures of democratic memory.

5.1 Participatory storytelling and public engagement

Participatory storytelling generates civic presence through shared attention, interpretive engagement, and relational design. These works invite users to co-construct meaning. Participation involves reflexive navigation, ethical engagement, and situated response, cultivating a civic ethos rooted in encounter and affective reciprocity. The NFBC supports these practices through its Interactive Studio, which foregrounds collaborative authorship, social relevance, and institutional care.

Bear 71 (Allison & Mendes, 2012) uses participatory logic by placing the user within a monitored ecosystem. The story of a collared grizzly bear in Alberta's Bow Valley unfolds through interactive surveillance tools that display movement, camera feeds, and ecological data. Users engage in this system as participants embedded in environmental observation. Each interaction carries ethical weight, turning navigation into a reenactment of surveillance. This structure highlights interspecies entanglement, infrastructural power, and the politics of visibility.

The bear's story resists closure. Participation renders systems of monitoring perceptible and reorients attention toward shared vulnerability.

Circa 1948 (Douglas, 2014) expands the participatory form through historical fiction. Set in postwar Vancouver, the project reconstructs Hogan's Alley and the Hotel Vancouver as immersive memory environments. Users move through soundscapes and spatial fragments without a fixed path. The absence of maps or prompts invites reflective wayfinding. Disorientation mirrors historical erasure and displacement, emphasizing form-making as public inquiry. Meaning arises through reflective movement and fragmentary encounters. This displacement arc opens onto questions of language, land, and jurisdiction that *Biidaaban: First Light* develops through Indigenous law and urban space.

Biidaaban: First Light (Jackson, 2018) introduces Indigenous futurism into this framework. Set in a speculative Toronto reclaimed by nature, the work reimagines urban space through the lens of Anishinaabe language and land-based knowledge. Resurgence here means Indigenous-led renewal of language, law, and everyday governance. Participation involves witnessing a resurgence. Cultural continuity emerges as a sensory and political presence. Users engage as guests, guided by Indigenous cosmologies and temporalities. Relationality becomes the ethical ground of interaction.

Supreme Law (Cizek, 2019) centers civic education through a layered interface that combines archival footage, interactive sequences, and pedagogical framing. Users explore Canada's 1982 Constitution through decisions that shape tempo and focus. The project presents constitutional history as a process open to critique and revision. Participation invites sustained inquiry into the formation of politics.

Together, these works enact participatory storytelling as a civic practice. They embed public values into their structure and resist instrumental interactivity. Each design fosters ambiguity, ethical attention, and accountability. Users are addressed as members of a civic public, not as consumers. This design logic reflects the Canadian aporetic condition, defined by ongoing tensions among cultural pluralism, ecological responsibility, and settler colonial legacies (Bessai, 2024). Within this context, storytelling enables reflective engagement. Participatory design becomes a form of public pedagogy that sustains ethical encounters with history, power, and possibility.

The next subsection examines how accessibility and inclusion shape this participatory model, emphasizing how NFBC design strategies enable meaningful engagement across diverse publics.

5.2 Accessibility and inclusion in digital storytelling

Accessibility and inclusion function as aesthetic and ethical foundations in the NFBC's digital storytelling. These principles shape how narratives engage diverse publics, foster participation, and affirm lived experience. The NFBC embeds these

commitments through tempo, tone, and cultural specificity, designing narrative forms grounded in presence, difference, and relational awareness. These strategies expand storytelling to include audiences whom dominant media and interface design have historically excluded.

Biidaaban: First Light (Jackson, 2018) imagines a speculative Toronto animated by Indigenous resurgence and ecological renewal. Jackson, 3D Creationist, and Jam3 developed the project to immerse users in a city where medicinal plants reclaim urban space, rivers flow through streets, and Anishinaabemowin signage shapes orientation. The creators avoid gamification. They design movement to require attention and presence. The immersive experience maintains focus without relying on spectacle. The form embeds inclusion by positioning users as guests within a space shaped by layered voices and cyclical temporalities that shift the sense of linear progress. The narrative frames accessibility through relational design, encouraging humility and attunement to others.

The Space We Hold (Hsiung et al., 2017) carries this ethic through testimony. A companion to *The Apology*, the project centers on the voices of three survivors of Japanese wartime sexual slavery. Its interface uses duration, care, and restraint. Long takes and minimal prompts slow attention to match the intensity of the testimony. Viewers must listen with presence. Accessibility shapes design and development: archival sources, consent protocols, and historical framing protect the narrative and affirm participation as an ethical form of witnessing.

Both projects integrate accessibility directly into their design. Voice, pacing, and cultural grounding shape how users engage. These elements form an inclusive public. The rhythm and tone carry accessibility and inclusion as foundational qualities. Inclusion takes shape through sustained attention and relational care. This design ethic aligns with the Canadian aporetic condition, defined by the tension among pluralist aspirations, settler colonial legacies, and epistemic justice (Bessai, 2024). *Biidaaban* and *The Space We Hold* do not resolve this dynamic – they render it legible. Inclusion becomes civic accountability through witnessing and recognition. Public storytelling emerges as a participatory practice anchored in dignity and complexity.

5.3 Expanding art as a public service in the digital age

The NFBC's digital storytelling affirms that publicly accountable art can sustain cultural practices independent of market imperatives. Storytelling, under this mandate, functions as civic infrastructure. It supports plurality, fosters reflexivity, and extends engagement beyond immediate consumption. Within a digital environment dominated by attention economies and platform logic, the NFBC configures narrative as a shared ethical encounter rooted in visibility, responsibility, and collective meaning.

Do Not Track (Gaylor, 2015) exemplifies this orientation through its critical lens on surveillance. Directed by Brett Gaylor and co-produced with Upian and ARTE, the web documentary uses each viewer's browser data to personalize the experience. Participation becomes a mode of self-confrontation as users navigate the architecture of their exposure. This design supports civic awareness, prompting reflection on one's role within digital infrastructures. The project avoids data monetization, algorithmic tracking, and audience segmentation, opting instead for a transparent and ethical interface. Enabled by the NFBC's institutional structure, *Do Not Track* interrogates digital capitalism without replicating its logic. This condition supports civic storytelling economies grounded in responsibility, where reach remains meaningful but not primary.

Supreme Law (Cizek, 2019) extends this model by turning constitutional discourse into participatory media. Created by the English-language digital studio, it presents Canada's 1982 Constitution and Charter of Rights and Freedoms through animated scenarios, voiced commentaries, archival material, and interactive quizzes. These components form a field of inquiry. The project encourages deliberation, places law in public history, and frames constitutional knowledge as provisional and shaped by civic experience.

The NFBC sustains this work through its public mandate and institutional position. As a federally funded agency, it operates within pressures shaped by national pluralism, economic constraint, and evolving media culture. These tensions structure the Canadian aporetic condition—a dynamic marked by concurrent demands for inclusivity, sovereignty, and neoliberal discipline (Bessai, 2024). NFBC initiatives reflect this condition through their formal choices and narrative strategies. Do Not Track and Supreme Law open space for civic encounters, addressing the audience as a public and measuring influence through resonance, reflection, and long-form memory.

This model challenges the disposability common in digital culture. It affirms that public values can guide digital storytelling as a sustained democratic practice. Through aesthetic coherence, ethical focus, and institutional grounding, NFBC digital projects enact a cultural democracy built on care, relevance, and accountability.

6. Conclusion

The NFBC's digital storytelling defines public service as a cultural practice. Its projects activate civic engagement, interpretive labour, and accountability. Through works such as *Bear 71*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, *The Space We Hold*, *Do Not Track*, and *Supreme Law*, the NFBC positions art as a form of infrastructure. These narratives make contradiction visible, hold tension in relation, and invite participation through ethical design. Each initiative constructs conditions for public reflection, shaping how audiences encounter pluralism, sovereignty, and surveillance within contemporary Canada.

This institutional practice operates within the Canadian aporetic condition, where national identity, ecological urgency, and cultural diversity intersect without resolution (Bessai, 2024). NFBC productions engage this complexity without simplification. Their design encourages openness; their form supports reflection. In cultural democracy, they propose a values-based approach to media engagement. Interactivity functions as civic intimacy. Publics emerge through sustained participation, not market alignment. This approach appears most clearly in the NFBC's interactive production practice, where the narrative becomes a shared social experience (National Film Board of Canada, 2016).

Against a media ecosystem structured by extraction and commodification, the NFBC models a different path. Its commitment to public ethics informs both production and distribution. These projects do not replicate dominant digital structures; they reconfigure them. Through institutional support, narrative experimentation, and civic attention, the NFBC demonstrates how art can function as a democratic infrastructure – one that creates space for reflection, plural expression, and shared responsibility. These projects demonstrate institutional capacity; structural contradictions endure beyond them. The NFBC's digital storytelling models public service as a cultural practice while remaining inside Canada's unresolved contradictions.

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