

Digital flames: public storytelling, climate, and reconciliation at National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

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Abstract: Public storytelling carries social responsibility during ecological breakdown and war. This article examines three National Film Board of Canada (NFB) projects – *Biidaaban: First Light* (Lisa Jackson), *Bear 71* (Leanne Allison with Jeremy Mendes), and *Losing Blue* (Leanne Allison) – and shows how they cultivate attention, relation, and action. The analysis builds on the Canadian aporetic condition (see Bessai) and Albert Murray’s stylization of experience, which shape perception into shareable form and civic practice. Across web, VR, and cinema, the projects present complexity with restraint and organize learning through voice, tempo, mapping, and sequence. *Biidaaban* models language resurgence in a VR Tkaronto foregrounding Anishinaabemowin place-names; *Bear 71* renders an interactive corridor ecology and turns surveillance traces into civic reflection; *Losing Blue* witnesses the life of ice through steady images and measured narration linked to field knowledge. The article outlines design principles for public-service storytelling in a climate emergency – proximity, reciprocity, slowness, invitational structure, continuity, and accountability – and specifies institutional routes for use in classrooms, libraries, festivals, and the open web. NFB infrastructure supports commissioning, curation, and circulation that keep works available for study and practice. These projects equip audiences with shared language and habits of attention that aid collective response to climate and conflict.

Keywords: digital storytelling; climate crisis; National Film Board of Canada; Indigenous futurism; interactive documentary; public media; cultural engagement.



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Introduction: a world on fire, a storytelling response

Wildfire smoke, heat emergencies, and flood seasons stretch across longer calendars. Wars displace families and fracture communities. People seek trustworthy language for grief and obligation. Cultural institutions share responsibility for that work. Public storytelling can convey memory, relationship, and practical insight across differences, so that collective action does not collapse into spectacle. This article takes that task as its central problem and sets a clear research question: how can public-service storytelling, produced and circulated by a national institution, equip communities to act with knowledge and care during a climate emergency and conflict? This article focuses on three NFB projects across web, VR, and theatrical form. *Biidaaban: First Light* invites viewers to walk through a future Tkaronto where Indigenous languages guide perception and orientation (see Jackson). *Bear 71* maps a corridor ecology and asks viewers to navigate a surveilled landscape with a grizzly's voice as a guide, while acknowledging their own networked presence (see Allison and Mendes). *Losing Blue* documents the fragility of glacial and lake systems, highlighting how communities rely on the ongoing life of ice. The film listens to scientists and captures the experience of place as a memory and a source of grief (see Allison).

Two interlocking questions steer the analysis. How do these works stylize experience so that audiences can hold complex information without paralysis? How does a public institution support that process with commissioning, curation, and circulation? The answers point toward cultural democracy that values access, participation, and respect. The article proceeds in four movements. The first lays out a conceptual frame through aporia and stylization. The next three movements step through each case, with attention to form, ethics, audience experience, and civic implications. A discussion section then compares patterns across the works and proposes design principles for practice. The conclusion names the NFB's role as cultural infrastructure that, when oriented in public service, helps communities navigate a world on fire.

Theoretical framework: aporia and the stylization of experience

Aporia names a charged impasse that requires courage and patience. The Canadian context provides a dense set of such tensions: Indigenous nations assert sovereignty while institutions work through colonial law; workers and communities rely on resource extraction while climate destabilizes; digital platforms promise connection while surveillance and harassment erode trust. Aporia in this sense does not paralyze; it insists on precision, humility, and care in language and action. Albert Murray's account of the stylization of experience provides a method. Art takes the flow of perception, memory, and feeling and shapes it into a form that a community can carry and share. Stylization does not smooth contradiction; it holds it in rhythm, tone, image, and sequence. A work that stylizes experience provides tools for attention and relation, allowing audiences to confront difficult facts together while maintaining their dignity. This circulation logic also resonates with accounts of transmedia civic engagement and networked protest that link form to public capacity (see Jenkins, Ito, and boyd; Tufekci).

Environmental humanities and media studies add further lenses. Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" proposes a mode of coexistence that resists the fantasy of purity and faces entanglement with honesty. Amitav Ghosh calls for narrative modes that can convey scale and time in the climate era, allowing readers and viewers to grasp planetary processes without abstraction. Zeynep Tufekci describes digitally networked publics and the conditions that enable durable movements rather than flash effects. These strands converge on a simple operational point: institutions can commission and circulate works that gather people into a shared experience where knowledge and feeling support action. The framework presented in this article ties these threads together. The aporetic condition names the field of tension (see Bessai); stylization names the artistic process that generates forms of attention; public institutions provide circulation and spaces for study that transform experience into civic capacity.

Public institutions translate artistic method into civic capacity through commissioning, curation, and circulation. In the Canadian context, the NFB's historic commitment to documentary as a public service – rooted in Grierson's principle that documentary is the "creative treatment of actuality" – establishes an institutional logic that values education, dialogue, and cultural memory alongside innovation and risk-taking (Grierson; Druick; Waugh et al.). This mandate underwrites experiments in interactive and immersive forms that cultivate participatory publics over years rather than weeks, and it clarifies why institutional ecology belongs within any theory of stylization and aporia.

Biidaaban: First Light. Indigenous futurism and linguistic resurgence

Biidaaban invites viewers into a dawn city – Tkaronto – where older names, teachings, and relations are legible again. The VR environment places the viewer at street level in a Toronto reclaimed by water, plants, and animals; language returns as a guiding force (Astle). Three languages are spoken here – Wendat, Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), and Anishinaabemowin – so orientation occurs through words that convey governance, kinship, and care. The experience uses gaze-based interaction that quiets the hands and focuses attention: you move, listen, and read as text appears within the world itself. The result is instruction without a didactic tone; presence and rhythm carry it. *Biidaaban* means "first light" in Anishinaabemowin, and the work holds that promise of renewal through language and relation.

Design choices align perception with Indigenous futurism grounded in care for place (Astle). Architectural modelling at the city scale renders a room-scale, walkable space; the city grid remains visible, while an older grammar overlays it and invites practice. That overlay teaches: names for water, paths, and beings return as prompts for conduct. Stylization turns the city into a classroom that respects the viewer as a learner and a guest. The work treats language as infrastructure for orientation, responsibility, and planning, so viewers experience words as routes into everyday practice. This connects with scholarship on Indigenous climate futures as ethical projects grounded in kinship, consent, and continuity (Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies" 154).

Production and circulation matter. Lisa Jackson created *Biidaaban* with 3D artist

Mathew Borrett and Jam3 with the NFB Digital Studio; it premiered at Tribeca (2018) and has screened in galleries, festivals, and classrooms. The piece incorporates an adaptation of the Thanksgiving Address and a spatial soundscape that sustains a calm, attentive tempo; Jackson describes the work as ambient and contemplative (Astle), a frame that supports learning and care. Exhibitions extend their life as a starting point for language learning and urban re-enchantment: teachers anchor lessons in place and vocabulary; planners walk the work and reflect on corridors, signage, and shared space; families use the experience to begin conversations about land, water, and responsibility. (National Film Board of Canada, *Biidaaban: First Light*; Astle)

Biidaaban models an approach to crisis that centers on relation and repair. The experience foregrounds plant knowledge, place-names, and kinship terms that invite renewal. Viewers encounter an urban classroom that honors the land's grammar and offers practices for recovery through learning and care. The method remains clear: teach through presence, orient through language, and invite practice. That method serves communities during rapid change in climate, migration, and urban life.

Bear 71: surveillance, ecology and networked empathy

Bear 71 arrived as web browsers turned into stages for immersive nonfiction (2012). Co-directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes, written by J. B. MacKinnon, and voiced by Mia Kirshner, the work guides the viewer with the first-person voice of a collared grizzly and overlays maps, cameras, and data points to render a corridor ecology, aligning with work on how interactivity reshapes documentary representation into participatory encounter (Nash 383–95). Developed in collaboration with the NFB Digital Studio (Vancouver) and Jam3, the project premiered in the Sundance New Frontier program before being made available online as a multi-user map with an optional webcam layer, situating the participant within the network.

The interface invites movement across a grid of rail lines, highways, and streams. Icons drift; trails appear; cameras flicker. The map develops character. It does not sit as a backdrop; it acts. The form performs the network and reveals constraints alongside connections. The interface assembles a public, not just an audience. Each viewer navigates alone; every navigation occurs inside a shared platform. The work, therefore, creates a social space and a film simultaneously. Such rooms matter for public life; they become places where people practice attention together and then carry that attention into other spaces. The NFB's decision to commission and host this experiment created a public room that extends beyond a theater into the living web. Stylization drives the effect. The creators align tone, voice, and interface so that viewers feel a sense of proximity without resorting to melodrama. The bear speaks in first person while the map shows distance and control. That pairing produces ethical pressure. The viewer recognizes the limits of sentiment and the costs of infrastructure. That recognition becomes civic language when communities discuss fencing, crossings, and policies that strike a balance between safety, movement, and habitat preservation. The story unfolds within a real geography and a historical context of management. The viewer meets a network that includes rangers, sensors, students, hikers, and the bear herself. The piece

demonstrates how interface design can facilitate ethical reflection, rather than just delivering information.

Bear 71 operates within what surveillance studies refer to as a surveillant assemblage – a distributed mesh that abstracts bodies into data flows while recombining them across platforms and institutions (see Haggerty and Ericson). The project leverages that mesh for civic attention by turning monitoring into situated reflection. Read alongside critiques of online economies that convert user activity into uncompensated labor and profiling (see Andrejevic), the piece demonstrates how interface, narration, and institutional hosting can redirect the energies of networked participation toward public reasoning about corridors, crossings, and care. The work's life extends through teaching and research. Instructors use it to introduce debates about surveillance and care – conservation groups screen segments during public meetings. The project, therefore, becomes both a tool and an artwork. That dual life aligns with public-service storytelling and supports cultural democracy.

Losing Blue: witness, slowness and the life of ice

Losing Blue turns time into a vessel for grief and learning. The camera lingers. The narration proceeds with a measured cadence that allows viewers to sit with the change. Images attend to colour, texture, and the sound of water; that attention honours the life of ice and the communities that depend on cold. The stylization invites viewers to watch and listen without haste, allowing understanding to grow through perception and feeling. The film addresses a gap that Amitav Ghosh notes in climate storytelling: many narratives lose their sense of scale and time. *Losing Blue* builds a structure that holds both. Close observation meets scientific context and community memory. Leanne Allison narrates, J. B. MacKinnon provides the scientific writing. The idea emerges from long-term work by limnologists Janet Fischer and Mark Olson, whose field studies inform the film's frame. The completed short run is 16 minutes long and premiered at the Calgary International Film Festival (2023) (National Film Board of Canada, "Three NFB Shorts at CIFF 2023") before being released across NFB channels. The film's patient cinematography enhances perceptual literacy, while the narration names the processes shaping lakes, glaciers, and weather. Peer-reviewed projections indicate that glacier volume in western Canada will decline by ~70% ($\pm 10\%$) by 2100, relative to 2005, with interior ranges facing the steepest losses and downstream effects on late-season flows (Clarke et al. 372–77). The film's method – slowness, close observation, careful naming – equips viewers to connect sensory witness with decision cycles in water management, hazard planning, and education.

The NFB's production and distribution pathways amplify these aims. Institutional support creates space for field time and meticulous post-production; the NFB release then reaches national and international audiences with clear pathways into classrooms, civic groups, and households. The film circulates beyond a festival window and stays available for lesson plans, community screenings, and seasonal conversations. Artists recognize craft; scientists recognize care with process and language; educators recognize a resource for shared understanding. In this way, *Losing Blue* functions as a bridge across sectors

seeking common ground for action.

Platforms for reflection and democratic dialogue

The three projects share an ethic of welcome. Each work invites viewers to step into a shared space and learn through presence. The projects also share an institutional ecology that sustains access and use. The NFB commissions work with craft ambition and ethical clarity; the agency then curates, contextualizes, and recirculates projects so that they continue to live in classrooms, libraries, and community halls. The mandate matters. A public institution can champion art that does not chase market novelty, since public value includes education, dialogue, and cultural memory. The NFB's mandate supports risk and experimentation, as well as wide circulation. Viewers meet these works at festivals, galleries, libraries, and through streaming platforms that the institution maintains with care. Teams conduct school events and community screenings. The works live in the commons.

This ecology continues an institutional thread from activist programs, such as Challenge for Change, to today's interactive studio, where commissions are paired with outreach, teaching guides, and open access (see Waugh et al.; Druick). Program design matters: curatorial notes, educators' kits, and cross-links among projects create durable learning paths. When a public agency resources these layers, works accrue use-value across classrooms, libraries, and civic forums, and they retain relevance beyond a festival calendar. Form shapes civic possibility. *Biidaaban* utilizes immersion to reset viewers' orientation and guide them into language learning. *Bear 71* utilizes an interface to reveal a networked life and to host reflections on surveillance and care. *Losing Blue* utilizes patient images and voices to cultivate attention that sustains scientific learning and collective responsibility. Each form trains a civic muscle that strengthens public life.

These forms also work together across platforms. The NFB curates online collections, promotes cross-links between projects, and commissions essays and teaching guides that extend their use. That ecology grows relationships over years, not weeks. Audiences return and stack encounters, so that moments of attention become habits of engagement. In this sense, NFB curation supports transmedia civic engagement, where stories move across venues and reinforce participation over time (see Jenkins, Ito and boyd). A shared set of design principles emerges:

1. Proximity. Bring the viewer close to the subject through voice, image, and interface so that abstraction does not erase relation.
2. Reciprocity. Honor communities and places through collaboration, credit, and care in the storytelling process. Build consent and return benefit.
3. Slowness. Give space for attention. Design sequences that hold time without distraction, allowing understanding to deepen.
4. Invitational structure. Treat the viewer as a participant with agency. Provide clear on-ramps for learning and conversation. Pair the work with guides and prompts.
5. Continuity. Plan for circulation across venues and years. Build partnerships with educators, librarians, and community organizations to enhance educational

opportunities.

6. **Accountability.** Align production with ethical frameworks that respect Indigenous sovereignty, ecological knowledge, and community safety. Maintain transparency about data, access, and risk.

These principles address aporia in practice (see Bessai). Climate breakdown and colonial structures produce tension; communities need form and method to navigate that tension while they build relationships and policy. The projects in this study deliver that balance through craft and care.

Discussion: comparative insights and practical applications

The three cases converge on a civic function: they generate shared attention that audiences can carry into action. They also demonstrate how different formal strategies serve distinct tasks. *Biidaaban* links language and place, enabling viewers to see the city as a living text. *Bear 71* maps a network and reveals ethical pressure points at crossings and fences. *Losing Blue* trains our eyes and ears to register changes in water and ice, so that grief and duty can evolve into stewardship. These formal strategies align with practical applications. City planners can integrate Indigenous place-names into signage and maps, and can invite communities to walk *Biidaaban* as a consultation tool. Transportation agencies can screen *Bear 71* segments during corridor planning and then discuss fence design, camera governance, and crossings. Schools can create interdisciplinary units around “Losing Blue” that combine science, art, and civics, and then pair screenings with local stewardship projects. The NFB’s public infrastructure enables such use. Teaching guides, online access, and outreach staff keep the works alive. This infrastructure embodies a philosophy of cultural democracy: institutions do not hold art at a distance; they open rooms for people to encounter it and to incorporate it into civic life.

Implementation prompts (for immediate use):

- *City & campus wayfinding:* map Indigenous place-names to on-site signage and digital maps; invite public walks with selected scenes from *Biidaaban* as orientation prompts (see Jackson; Whyte).
- *Transportation & habitat planning:* open corridor consultations with short navigations of *Bear 71*, then deliberate on fence design, camera governance, and crossing metrics (see Haggerty and Ericson; Andrejevic).
- *Watershed literacy:* pair *Losing Blue* with a local “blue inventory” – temperature logs, turbidity notes, citizen photos – and discuss implications against regional glacier and snowpack projections (see Clarke et al.).
- *Assessment:* track retention (pre/post vocabulary), transfer (policy references to the work), and participation (attendance and repeat engagement) to evaluate cultural-democratic outcomes.

Conclusion: public storytelling as cultural infrastructure

Communities need rooms where people can learn together during a crisis. The NFB's mandate and history position the institution to maintain such rooms and to invite artists who can build them. *Biidaaban*, *Bear 71*, and *Losing Blue* demonstrate how stylization can convey complexity without spectacle and enable relationships without sentimentality. Each work supports action by training perception, naming obligations, and honoring memory. Climate emergency and the legacies of war and colonial violence require institutions that convene knowledge, care, and practice. Public storytelling can achieve this when commissioners, producers, and artists align their ethics and craft. The design principles in this article provide a practical template for future projects. The method remains simple and demanding: build proximity, honor reciprocity, grant time, invite participation, plan for continuity, and maintain accountability. Institutions that adopt this method will strengthen cultural democracy and equip communities for the work ahead. Future commissions can integrate these design principles at the brief stage – proximity, reciprocity, slowness, invitational structure, continuity, and accountability – so that public storytelling functions as cultural infrastructure that communities can use across seasons and crises.

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