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Counter-Hegemonic Discourse on the Working Class in National Film Board World War II Films

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Abstract

For a long time, films produced by the National Film Board of Canada immediately after its establishment and up until the end World War II have been greatly neglected or simply dismissed as examples of Canadian war propaganda. These films represent an essentially counter-hegemonic outlook on the role of the working class in Canadian society. In this context, these films informed and were informed by the discourse of the Popular Front, an umbrella formation which at the time was initiated and led by supporters of the Communist Party of Canada, both inside and outside the labour movement. This paper brings to light an investigation and analysis of a wealth of archival film material from the initial years of the NFB, much of which either have been long forgotten or were, in fact, never really known. Against several earlier and unsubstantiated scholarly assumptions, this study delineates the ideological significance of the NFB's depiction of workers during this critical period in Canadian history.

Introduction

The establishment of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in 1939 ushered in a critical phase in the history of Canadian cinema's depiction of working class people. In contrast to the films earlier produced by provincial and federal film agencies, those produced by the NFB between 1939 and 1946 provided what amounts to a counter-hegemonic appreciation of the role of the working class in furthering and building a new social and political order.[1] As a broad pro-labour and antifascist political and cultural movement transcended the circles of militant working class activists and their base within the Canadian communist left, the films produced by the NFB assumed a supporting role in a historical shift that witnessed the "labouring" of the Canadian cultural landscape.[2] These films became part of an intellectual stratum associated with a working-class-based counter-hegemonic historical bloc that advocated a new and more involved role for labour both in the fight against fascism and in the creation of a society based on the practice of grass-roots democracy and the collective use of economic and social resources.

My research within a wealth of NFB films from this period (many of which are long forgotten or were, in fact, never really known) calls into question revisionisms of writers who insist too strongly on the NFB's authoritarian and elitist propagandistic function.[3] My reading of the films, which takes into account the history and the dynamics of the propositions put forward at the time by the Canadian political left, allows a recognition of the level to which these films correspond ideologically with how this left (primarily

associated with the Communist Party of Canada) viewed its role and the role of labour during this period in Canadian history. In hindsight, this study describes how NFB films informed and were informed by a loose affiliation of movements and organizations which, in various forms of alliance or sympathy with the communist movement in the post-Depression period, contributed to the labouring of Canadian culture. In this context, this essay points out how these films designate a nascent counter-hegemonic formation, one that presents a critique of capitalism and points to the possibilities for progressive grassroots alignments between class factions in an advanced industrial era.

In setting the parameters of this research, I have surveyed almost the entire catalogues depicting the body of film produced by the NFB between 1939 and 1946. In this, my goal was to eventually survey the films that mainly dealt with issues related to labour and the working class. All in all, I was able to identify and analyze around 180 titles out of a total output of 553 films (a significant number of which were footage repeatedly or simultaneously produced under different titles). These films incorporate one or more themes relating to working class and labour politics.[4]

In addition to the above, I have also incorporated another set of films. At the time when early NFB films were produced, the discussion of topics such as communism, the Russian Revolution, and the Soviet Union had major implications on working class and labour politics. My survey, therefore, would not have been sufficient without the inclusion of films that dealt with such critical topics. All these films, in addition to the core of films dealing with labour and the working class, were screened and assessed and provided the primary analytical source for this study.

Out of the Depression and into the War: NFB Films between 1939 and 1941

The period between 1939 and 1941 represented a transitional moment in the history of the National Film Board of Canada. This period began with the establishment of the board and ended with the dissolving of its predecessor, the Motion Picture Bureau (GMPB) and the transfer of all its properties and staff to the control of the NFB. In the immediate period following the creation of the NFB, the GMPB/NFB network produced a total of sixty-six films. Films produced between 1939 and 1941 bore the official mark of the Motion Picture Bureau. All these films eventually became the property of the NFB. All early NFB productions were documentaries that mainly dealt with the mobilization in support of the war against Germany. Films produced in 1939, however, focused on the issues of unemployment and the effect of the Great Depression on working people.

Stuart Legg's 1939 films *The Case of Charlie Gordon* and *Youth is Tomorrow* epitomized a major shift in Canadian cinema. Legg did what no other filmmaker had dared to do up until then. He walked into the slums of the working class coal town of Glace Bay and came out with a story that went to the core of all the hushed-up hopes and fears of unemployed youth. As Canada was stepping out of the Great Depression, Legg's films advocated the consensual involvement of the government in the management and the co-coordination of the social and economic resources of the country in an effort to pull the country out of the depression, and as basis for building a co-operative alternative to the market and profit driven economy.

In turn, other NFB films similarly accentuated the importance of government intervention in relieving the post-Depression conditions among Canadian farmers and agricultural workers. In *Heritage* (1939), J. Booth Scott delineates how, after years of intensive drought coupled with the disastrous fall in prices during the Depression, many prairie farmers were forced to board up their homes and seek work elsewhere. Produced in the aftermath of a decade-long anti-government grassroots campaign by farmers and farm workers, *Heritage* favorably refers to the newly created Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration government plan, which attempted to address the demands of these farmers for more government involvement. While it ignores the more complex questions surrounding the state of despair of the farmers during the

Depression, the film nevertheless reiterates the notion of collective public involvement as a sensible method for articulating working solutions to the problems faced by Canadian agricultural workers.

Another set of NFB films specifically deals with the topic of East Coast fisheries. One such film, Stuart Legg's *Toilers of the Grand Banks* (1940) first describes how the sunlight, striking through shallow water, stimulates the growth of marine plants in the sea bed, providing food and breeding ground for fish. The film's main theme, however, revolves around emphasizing the labouring process "which stands behind the success of Canada's fishing economy." *Toilers* draws a detailed and epical visual picture of the work performed by the fishermen and the shipyard workers of the Canadian east coast and the significance of physical labour in the actual creation of economic value.

Labour at War

By July 1941, the dissolution of the Canadian Motion Picture Bureau and the transfer of its operations to the NFB's administration was virtually complete. This coincided with the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Germany, a political development that was to signify an even clearer association between the left and labour's outlook on the nature of the fight against fascism, and the NFB own assessment of the nature of the war in Europe.

A new political atmosphere began to emerge almost immediately after the Soviet Union entered the War against Germany. The Soviet Union had become a war ally to Canada and to Britain. The films produced by the NFB now provided an even more assertive appreciation of the role of labour in the war and in building of post-war society. This occurred in conjunction with the communist left's re-adoption of the policy of Popular Front alliance.[5] When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Labour and the supporters of the policies of the Popular Front began to shift away from their earlier opposition to the war in Europe. Instead of their earlier characterization of the war in Europe as an inter-imperialist struggle between two capitalist blocs, the communists now began to conceive of it as a war aimed towards stopping fascism.

The Popular Front represented a base for a counter-hegemonic historical bloc. It also became an integral element in the development of an organic intellectual practice in different areas of cultural discourse. Building upon the vibrant connections with the working class built since the 1920s and the years of the Great Depression, labour and socialist activists in the late 1930s and early 1940s worked to make art more relevant to the issues of peace, democracy, social justice, women's equality, collective organization of society and of economic and social resources, and to the fight against fascism. With the help of favourable domestic and international economic and political conditions, this widely based movement exercised an important cultural influence in Canadian society, including among leading filmmakers and administrators in the NFB, as well as among a significant number of its workers and creative talent.[6]

While earlier NFB war films avoided making reference to the political significance of the fight against fascism, the films produced after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union provided a different perspective on the nature and the significance of this struggle. The Popular Front now characterized the war against fascism as one in which labour had to fight in order to guarantee future progress, democracy, and peace, and ultimately to achieve socialism. NFB films implicitly echoed how the Popular Front advocated the need to create a wide class alliance to fight against fascism.

The definition of the notion of democracy itself in NFB films was also becoming synonymous with the idea of grassroots majority power in order to benefit the greater part of society (rather than the economically privileged minority). The central participation of labour and working people, including the full participation of working women, was seen as an essential ingredient for the victory against fascism and for democracy. Simultaneously, and as they dealt with the issue of fighting fascism and of democracy, NFB films stressed the importance of guaranteeing a strong basic social safety net and a healthy and safe work environment for working class people.

A particularly important film that epitomizes the political thrust of most NFB films of the period is *Inside Fighting Russia* (1942). To the background of images of women and men at work, the film renders the Soviet socialist experience, not simply as an oppositional antithesis to capitalism, but as a democratic alternative to it, one that bases itself on the motto of "one for all and all for one." The film refers to the Soviet system as one that seeks expanding the democratic process to include all segments of society. It suggests that under the new system and for the first time in history people in the Soviet Union have finally become capable of collectively "planning their future." However, with all its expressions of solidarity with the Soviet Union and its sympathy for the role of workers in governing and building the Soviet State, the film avoids posing the capitalist and the socialist systems directly against one another. Instead, the film praises the Soviet experience in the context of the specific development of Russian society in the early part of the twentieth century. As such, the film allows room for its audience to contemplate the specificity of each society's forms and dynamics of change and development.

While *Inside Fighting Russia* emphasizes the ideals of co-operation, social justice, and democratic values, it inadvertently stresses that each society has its own dynamics that eventually determine how it upholds and implements these ideals. Since fascism represents the antithesis to the democratic ideals shared by most humanity, the film suggests that the difference between the systems of capitalism and socialism should not be allowed to hinder their co-operation in fighting fascism.

Other NFB films emphasize the need for the multifaceted participation of labour in the war against fascism. *Thank You Joe* (1942) is the story of a Canadian soldier recalling his work in building trucks and tanks in Windsor and how this work positively and directly impacted on his ability to perform his duties more effectively as a soldier. In *Bluenose Schooner* (1943), we are escorted on a cod-fishing trip to the Grand Banks, courtesy of a group of fishermen from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. The film celebrates the discipline, the courage, and the organizational effectiveness of a thirty-man fishing crew who work in the midst of the ever-present danger of German submarines.

NFB World War II films praise the independent role of labour unions and workers in the mobilization of the country's social resources to fight fascism. Robert Edmonds' film *Coal Face, Canada* (1943) specifically describes the effort by organized labour to support the war. Co-produced by the United Mineworkers of America and Coal Operators of Canada, the film tells the story of a young man who, after being discharged from the army, returns to his small coal town. The focus is on the need to recognize the critical role of labour unions in educating workers about the nature of the war. It also reminds us of the significance of these unions' task of defending workers' rights and improving their members' quality of life.

Variations on the same theme are also found in the 1943 industrial newsmagazine series *Workers at War*. The series incorporated several versions of NFB films and was specifically screened, both during work breaks and as part of the social gatherings and the action rallies within working class communities. The films of the series repeatedly reiterated the socialized character of modern industrial production and the positive significance of publicly owned industries. They also stressed the role of these industries in the formation of the country's economic strength "without which no victory against fascism can be achieved."

However, not all NFB films depicting workers between 1942 and 1946 deal with their role in the war against fascism. Other films focus on the role of workers in excavating the wealth of the country's resources and in supporting the welfare of society. In this context, the welfare of workers is conceived as a crucial element in the sustenance of Canada's economic and social growth and prosperity.

In *Coal for Canada* (1944), for example, we survey the tough working conditions in an undersea mine in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The film paints an epical picture of the labouring process, which involves dynamiting and grading the coal after which it is loaded on a freighter that transports the coal to various industrial centres of the country. Images of workers are presented in a manner characteristic of the social realist trend, which tended to idealize the role of labour in society. (By the early 1940s. this trend was also beginning to dominate

the Soviet Union's officially sanctioned arts policy.) A similar story is presented in *Salt from the Earth* (1944) in which we appraise the mining, processing, and use of salt as we tour a salt mine in another Nova Scotia town, Malagash. Both films consistently stress the central value of physical labour in producing material goods that are essential to the fulfillment of the political and social needs of society. Both also point out the prudence of utilizing collective social energy and resources for the benefit of the entire society. Efficient social and economic planning and the just distribution of wealth are presented as the rational alternative to the inefficiency of the "old" methods of production that solely rely on individual and private profit motivation.

As they dealt with the situation in Canadian farms, NFB films urged the organization of resources and labour power to meet the economic and social needs and priorities of Canada and the world. The theme of organizing and streamlining social energies to address collective social priorities is posed as a commonsensical route to satisfy the needs of society and to move the country forward on the economic level. Films like *Battle of the Harvests* (1942), *Farm Front* (1943), *The Farmer's Forum* (1943), and *Plowshares into Swords* (1943) address the challenge facing the agricultural industry and emphasize the urgent need to establish a rational balance between the food demands and the resources required to satisfy them.

By 1943, after years of labour protests that advocated the creation of a national program for economic relief to unemployed workers, the government finally legislated an Unemployment Insurance Act (UI). The implementation of the new law comprised another important victory for organized labour as well as for the forces of the left, both of whom have raised its demand for over twenty years. Job security and the need to provide social and economic safeguards against future unemployment also became a theme in a number of NFB films. In *A Man and His Job* (1943), Alistair M. Taylor tells the story which extends over the life of a worker from his unemployed years during the Depression through 1943, the year when the UI is implemented. The film compares, on the one hand, the inefficiency of attempting to deal with the problem of unemployment without the intervention of the government and leaving it to the impulses of the whim of market forces, and, on the other hand, the benefits of creating a level of social and economic coordination and security to help maximize the utilization of society's labour resources.

The urgent need to alleviate the housing shortage for working class families represented another critical component of Popular Front policies.[7] By in large, NFB films shared the views of the Popular Front on the issue. The NFB film *Wartime Housing* (1943), for example, illustrates how wartime rapid industrial expansion has pressed the need to build decent housing for workers. Another film, *Building a House* (1945) discusses how the organization of labour resources can efficiently contribute to solving the housing shortages problem. The idea of collective work and the use of more labour power are described as the more efficient means of dealing with the crisis. The film poses its view on the issue in the form of a question: "If nine men can build a house in sixty-four days, how long will it take seventy-two men to build a house?" The film then illustrates how collective effort and efficient utilization of the workforce not only provides work for people, but also furnish a basis for better living conditions for workers and for the entire society. It also reiterates the notion that socialized work presents a feasible alternative in various areas of social and economic development: "One man's work depends on another man's work, not only for those men working directly on a house but also those in factories, mines, etc."

Democracy and the Role of Labour-Management Committees

Several NFB films proposed and supported the creation of a social and political partnership between labour, management, and government that would help to improve the working and living conditions for workers and in the process help to meet the urgent demands for increasing wartime industrial production. Films also argued in support of strengthening democratic practice in the workplace through the expansion of workers' grassroots involvement in the decision-making process.

The creation of Labour-Management Committees during the war years was achieved in conjunction with the demands of labour and its supporters on the left. It was also part of the Popular Front's emphasis on the need to unite various social and political forces in the fight against fascism, reflecting the way in which the left conceived the priorities of the struggles facing labour. For the left, the creation of a temporary partnership between labour, management, and the government was considered as a historical step forward that would help prove strategic propositions to widen labour's involvement (as partial as it may be) in managing the means of production and, by extension, in operating the country's economy.[8] As such, the committees also offered a counter-hegemonic value system to the commonsensical rationalization of the capitalist division of labour between, on the one hand, management/ownership, and, on the other, waged labour. In this context, this partnership brought labour into a sphere which—in the context of capitalist hegemony—traditionally or "commonsensically" belongs only to the capitalist class.[9]

Some of the NFB war films were specifically produced to promote the role of the committees, while others were part of discussion prefaces or trailers to films that dealt with a wide range of issues. Both kinds of film, however, paid homage to the idea of labour-management partnership and its benefits and focused on the feasibility of implementing consultative democratic discussion and practice within the workplace, both among workers and between workers and management. This partnership was also viewed as an effective base to successfully discuss and implement projects that can potentially benefit the entire society.

In *Work and Wages* (1945), for example, the success of the experiment of labour and management cooperation during the war is presented as a testament that supports the proposition to continue such a relationship even after the end of the war. *Partners in Production* (1944) proposes the goal of grassroots "total democracy" as an essential ingredient for the success of the war against fascism. It also contemplates the Labour-Management Committees' particularly effective role in building and strengthening the Canadian coal industry.

"Discussion Trailers"

Other NFB war films discuss the role of media in advocating grassroots discussion and interaction, helping to widen participatory democracy, inside and outside the workplace. Several films stressed that the media, including film and radio, are vehicles that could encourage workers and members of civil society to discuss problems at the workplace as well as issues of national and international significance. A number of films used a technique that consisted of the presentation of a three-minute discussion in which several people would engage in an informal discussion about a specific theme. "Discussion Films" (most of which were produced under the series title *Getting the Most of a Film* and produced between 1944 and 1946) incorporated a wide range of topics, including the war mobilization efforts and problems in the workplace, labour and management coordination, and labour relations between urban and rural workers, as well as labour relations on various local and international levels. In several cases, the discussion involved both leaders from the trade union movement as well as ordinary workers who frequently expressed views that did not coincide with the views of labour union bureaucracy.

The Role of the Co-operative Movement

Democracy in the workplace was also discussed in connection with the collective control and use of the means of economic production. A number of NFB films specifically praised the role played by the co-operative movement in the east coast's fishing industry. The 1943 film *Grand Manan* illustrated how people of New Brunswick derive their living from fishing in the Bay of Fundy. The emphasis, however, was on how collective work methods used by the island's fishermen reflect the communal interdependency of the entire

community. This interdependency is presented as an integral resource that allows the community to sustain and enrich its cultural heritage and its economic success.

A similar theme was presented in Jean Palardy's *Gaspe Cod Fishermen* (1944). The film describes the collective work which "brings together the people of Grande-Riviere on the Gaspe Peninsula to catch, prepare, and sell the cod upon which they depend for food and income." The life of Members of the Grand Riviere Cooperatives was seen as testimony to the benefit and efficiency of socialized organization of work. The film illustrates how collective practice extends even to the community's control over the town's commercial enterprises such as the general co-op store, which provides the town with most of its daily living needs. Palardy also describes aspects of the political process practised by the community and points out the use of collective discussion and decision-making as the community's basis for articulating the "building of democracy into their own way of life."

The Role of Women Workers

The outbreak of the war in Europe resulted in a major labour shortage within the Canadian economy. The substantial increase in the demand for war machinery and the mass recruitment of men to the army resulted in a greater participation of women in the workforce. Much of the mainstream cultural discourse, however, maintained a belligerent patriarchal attitude towards women. Arguing against admitting women into the armed forces, Minster of Defence James Ralston insisted that, while he realized "how patriotic these ladies are in their desire to do war work," the reality remains that "everyone who desires to be directly engaged in war work cannot be so engaged" (Debates, 1941, 1698). On the other hand, the increased participation by women on the leadership level of the labour movement and within various organizations and movements of the Canadian left was making an important impact on the counter-hegemonic discourse on women.[10]

Several NFB films saw the increased involvement of women within the industrial workforce as a temporary response to the demands of an extraordinary war situation, one after which women would return to their "natural" jobs at home. As they stress the importance of women's participation in the war production industry, the message in films such as *Proudly She Marches* (1943) is that this work would be merely temporary. The film even hints that such a line of activity (e.g., working in heavy industries or as military personnel) is "unnatural" for women. As it points out the resourceful capacity of women who work as technicians, photographers, photography developers, aircraft workers, and technical experts, the message of the film remains focused on the provisional duration of women's involvement in such a line of work.

Another set of NFB films, however, present a different take on the role of women in the workforce. In *Handle with Care* (1943), the discussion centres on the role of Canada's munitions' industries in the context of one factory's reliance on a largely female labour force. A Montreal factory "owned by the people of Canada" is presented as a testimony to the ability of women to handle "accurate and precarious work." In *Canada Communiqué No. 3* (1943), we are introduced to an "army of women shipbuilders" in the West Coast shipyards. These women, the film asserts, have proved their capacity to indulge work even in an industry that has been traditionally conceived as a "men's domain."

Other films projected the hope that the new women's involvement would help plant the seeds for a new attitude towards them and would eventually guarantee full gender social and economic equality. Some films express interest in the creation of a social and political support system that would comprehensively help free women workers to participate in the country's workforce on an equal footing with men.

Contrary to how other films dealt with the theme of women and war, and despite the effort by the government and some NFB officials to water down the socio-economic analysis of its original screenplay, Jane Marsh's *Women are Warriors* presents a particularly powerful message in relation to the role of women in society.[11] The film explicitly links the fight against fascism, the role of labour, and the need for an alternate

approach to the involvement of women in the workforce both during and after the war. The film also links women's liberation, the liberation from fascism, and the establishment of a new social order where democratic values are also conceived in the context of "liberation from economic want." As March discusses the state of affairs in the Soviet Union, she points out unequivocally "over 20 years ago the Soviet Union achieved what only today women are achieving in the West." She refers to the constitutional rights achieved by women in the Soviet Union. These rights represented the basic prerequisite that guaranteed a secure position for women to "work equally with men" in all "social and economic sectors including as petroleum engineers and as farmers." This multifaceted participation by women in all areas of work also strengthens "the formidable ability of this society to mobilize against Nazi Germany," the film argues. It concludes that, as a direct result of gender equality, when the war erupted "women in the Soviet Union were ready to be on all the front lines of the battle."

Reclaiming Lost Ground: The NFB and the Cold War

As the roots of the Cold War began to take hold towards the end of World War II, the NFB's new management, which replaced John Grierson's "Communist infiltrated administration," worked to bring the board closer to the government line on communism and by extension to its position on labour issues (Evans 1979; Grierson 1984; Scher 1992). By the early 1950s, the new director of the NFB announced the creation of a series entitled *Freedom Speaks Programme*. The series proclaimed the goal of "counter[ing] communist propaganda with a positive statement in effective dramatic form of the values that we as a free people believe to be basic to democratic society" (Madger 1993, 81).

By the late 1940s, NFB films dealing with labour topics were reduced considerably. Between 1942, the year in which Canadian labour and the Communist Party became fully involved in supporting the war effort, and 1946, the year when the official anti-Communist campaign officially began with the arrest of Communist MP Fred Rose, NFB titles categorized under "work and labour relations" were produced at an average of 14.8 films per year. The annual production of such titles consecutively dropped to four in 1947, none in 1948, and two in 1949 (in other words, an annual average of two). This drop massively exceeded the less-than-one-third drop in the NFB's overall annual average film production output between the two periods (from 97.4 films between 1942 and 1945 to 62.66 films between 1947 and 1949).

The Counter-Hegemonic Significance of NFB War Films

As NFB films between 1939 and 1946 pondered social and political issues such as unemployment, economic prosperity, World War II, democracy, and post-war construction, they also became part of an ethico-intellectual milieu that advocated a labour-based counter-hegemonic cultural practice. These films emphasized the central role of labour in effecting change and progress in society. As such, the films contemplated the contribution of workers to the war against fascism, called for the defence and the celebration of the establishment of a working class state in Russia, and reflected upon the possibility of constructing a new world order based on the ideas of collective democratic control and utilization of social and economic resources. As part of this cultural practice, these films also helped shape an ideological alternative to the Canadian cinematic culture that existed before the establishment of the NFB itself.

The original official pretext that ushered in the establishment of the NFB in 1939 envisioned the creation of a new identity for cinema; it also looked at film as an instrument that could help expand the role of the government in improving the lives of its citizens. While this vision did not necessarily contradict the vision or the goals advocated by the Popular Front and the labour movement at the time, it did not necessarily endorse them either.

The influence exercised by prominent NFB artists and intellectuals who themselves were informed by socialist ideas might have played a role in finding a major space for ideas and approaches that were more explicitly reflective of the views of the Popular Front. Stuart Legg's self-acclaimed political views and Jane March's class-conscious ideas about women's liberation are particularly important examples in this regard. Future research might uncover more substantive appreciation of the role played by Legg and March and other NFB filmmakers in providing the counter-hegemonic political edge that characterized a substantial number of wartime films. However, the ideological significance of those films could not have materialized without a wider context and dynamic that has influenced the social, political, and cultural life in Canada before and during World War II.

The ideological function of NFB films grew and acquired its counter-hegemonic character as these films interacted, enhanced, or contradicted the views and visions of each of the two main forces that dominated the arena of political and social struggle at the time, namely militant labour and the capitalist establishment. In this context, the role played by the Communist Party and the Popular Front contributed in a major way to how these films became part of a larger movement that advocated an alternative ideological perspective and a new historical political and cultural bloc.

Today, the films that we have examined have lost most of their original impact and power. They mostly look and sound crude and overbearing. Tom Daly, a contemporary NFB filmmaker commented recently: "Many of those wartime films don't stand up now. They are too time-locked" (Jones 1996, 27). Yet, I would argue that among the artistically and politically critical unique features of these films was their artistic and dramatic use of a disembodied voice to add historical and ethico-political nuances to the visual images and the political situations that they were assessing. Rather than presenting bureaucratic reports to Canadians, these films presented fervent editorials. Now usually decried as manipulation of the audience by what amounts to a Voice of God, in these films, the voice-over was that of the filmmakers unabashedly explicating the newsreel footage, re-recreated historic moments, maps, and original footage devised to build their arguments.

Some of these films subtly celebrated the period's fascination with socialistic programs as an effort to end unemployment by sponsoring new communities built on co-operative rather than capitalistic principles. Their arguments, however, were largely muted, suggesting this may have been only a short-term solution for larger and more fundamental social and economic problems. Ideas that became part of the NFB's film discourse (for example, collective work, sharing of resources, labour solidarity, democratic and equal participation of workers in the affairs of society, and the subtle solidarity with the Soviet "working class" state) were put forward during a time that witnessed a major development in the role of a militant labour movement and its supporters on the political left. These ideas promoted a vision within which labour assumed a prominent position within the Canadian political and social decision-making process.

By projecting values that complemented a labour-centred perspective, many NFB war films simultaneously stressed the leadership role of labour within a widely based counter-hegemonic historical bloc. The success of several NFB filmmakers in presenting a perspective that placed labour and its role within Canadian society at the centre of their film discourse also placed the board itself at the centre of the struggle around class hegemony.

A significant characteristic of NFB films between 1939 and 1946 is linked to how they inferred the role and the position of the working class within the process of continuity and change in Canadian society. Under capitalism, change is equated with natural and inevitable technological and economical evolution. In this context, passivity in relation to political decision-making is conceived as the only sensible alternative to interfering against the inevitable wheels of progress. However, individual self-determination remains an important feature of capitalist ideological values that needs to be acknowledged if change is to occur without major social upheavals. In other words, in order to be part of the late capitalist perspective on "change,"

one needs to articulate his/her own way of surviving through the ordeals that come along with technological and economic development. Individuals need to negotiate ways of coping with the benefits as well as the repercussions of progress. Most of the NFB films between 1939 and 1946 provided a fundamentally contradictory vision.

NFB films presented a challenge to how the working class and working class individuals were traditionally perceived within Canadian film discourse. Working people were not presented as passive observers of a history that links the past, the present, and the future in a chain of uninterrupted evolutionary change, nor as victims of its inevitability or as individual heroes, each of whom was fighting his or her own way out of the curse of labouring. Instead, through challenging the commonsensical view of history as fate or as a vehicle within an uninterrupted process of evolution, these films explored how the conscious intervention of working people molded and shaped history.

The eventual disintegration of the left's historical bloc can be traced to a complex set of economic, political, and social circumstances that can only be addressed in the ensuing dynamics that dominated the period of the Cold War. Clearly, the postwar period heralded the celebration of the Canadian national myth proclaimed in the name of triumphant monopoly capitalism. Under these conditions, the NFB itself encountered a major political offensive that eventually resulted in changing the composition of its leadership and the ideological framework of its film discourse. As film scholar Tom Waugh suggests in his article on NFB war film *Action Stations!*, the postwar situation in the NFB reflected a "dramatic reflection of the play of cultural, political, and ideological factors, the confrontation of ideals and realities, in an era that both saw the dissipation of the cultural left of the Popular Front and the baptism under fire of the young Canadian cinema" (Waugh 1985, 59).

Notes

1. For more detail on my research on NFB World War II films and on the overall institutional and political context that allowed for the development of counter-hegemonic discourse within these films, consult my Ph.D. dissertation (Khouri 2000).
2. This term is borrowed from Denning (1996). Denning refers to how American cultural practice in the 1930s and 1940s widely reflected the influence of labour and its supporters on the American left.
3. Joyce Nelson (1988) focuses on what she characterizes as the negative impact of the role played by the NFB founder John Grierson. Nelson rejects the claims that Grierson's interest in documentary was an expression of a left-wing or even liberal political orientation. She argues that the films made at the NFB during the war period were based on aesthetic and political strategies that were obnoxious and repressive and that even the anti-fascist films were themselves authoritarian in their tone.
4. Films produced by the NFB during the period at hand put specific emphasis on depicting blue collar industrial workers. This corresponds with the numerical strength of this section of workers during a specific period of Canada's capitalist development. This emphasis also reflects the importance, at the time, of the role played by these workers in organizing and mobilizing other workers and segments of society including the unemployed, farmers, and agricultural and fisheries workers.
5. The term "Popular Front" (used interchangeably with the term "United Front") was repeatedly used by the Communist International to indicate the initiation of a new policy *vis-à-vis* the questions of revolution and anti-fascist co-operation. The new policy created parameters for a relationship between, on the one hand, working class militants, communist parties, and socialist intellectuals, and, on the other hand, non-Marxist socialists and left liberals within the working class and within other classes and social sections of the population. Popular Front policy in Canada introduced a new interpretation of the involvement of labour and of communists in the fight for democracy. The

struggle for democracy and social justice was proposed as synonymous with, or a prerequisite for, the struggle for socialism. This approach played a major role in the Communist Party of Canada's expanding its influence beyond the working class and allowed it to build a base for a wide counter-hegemonic coalition/bloc during the war. For a detailed account of Popular Front policy, refer to the statement by Dimitrov (1938, 31), one of the leaders of the Communist International at the time.

6. For some interesting samples of the range of support towards socialist, communist, and Popular Front policies among NFB workers and filmmakers see Beveridge (1978) and Scher (1992).
7. For an account of the Popular Front policy on working class housing during World War II years, read the speech by Communist MP Fred Rose in the Debates (1944, 96).
8. As an example of the Front's policy on the labour-management partnership during the war, see Dorise Nielson's speech in the Debates (1942, 463). Nielson was an officially "independent" MP who was close to the Labour Progressive Party (the official name of the Communist Party of Canada during the period of its ban after 1939).
9. My use of the term "common sense" relates to Gramsci's usage of it in connection with the notion of maintaining hegemonic dominance in a civil society through philosophical consensus around people's values and ideas. Values in any given society are always open to different interpretations; they can be expounded hegemonically (or commonsensically) and hence by solidifying the consent of the subaltern and its concordance with the interests of the dominant class, or they can conversely be construed counter-hegemonically (or in a good-sensical manner) in which case they challenge ideologically the outlook of this class.
10. Many leading labour and communist organizers between the 1920s and 1940s were women. Among those were Florence Cunstance, the first secretary of the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia; Bea Colle, the secretary of the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion; Beckie Buhay, the editor of the early Communist Party press and a leading member of the party; Florence Theodore, leader of the party in Saskatchewan; Jeanne Corbin, an organizer of bush workers and miners in Northeastern Ontario and Quebec; Lea Robak and Madeleine Parent, both Quebec organizers in the needle trade and the electrical industries; and Annie Buller, an organizer for the Industrial Union of Needle Trades and the Workers' Unity League and leader in the famous Estevan miners' strike of 1929, among many others.
11. For more details on the film, see Martineau (1977).

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