



## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

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## 4 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NFB: A POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

In addition to forging what later came to be pronounced as the symbol of “Canada’s cultural particularity and creative potential,”<sup>1</sup> the 1939 establishment of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) also spawned the first Canadian motion picture framework to advance a left-oriented estimation of the role and position of labour and the working class in society and politics. This role found its roots in the increased levels and multiple forms of working-class and leftist political and cultural activities during the 1920s and 1930s. The NFB’s film discourse, however, came to life also as a direct result of the role played by a group of organic intellectual filmmakers and artists, who were able to bring to fruition a new cinematic practice in connection with working-class politics.

This chapter surveys the history of the establishment of the NFB. It points out elements in the Board’s early working practices and how they contributed to the shaping of its discourse on labour and working-class issues. This includes a brief survey of the transfer of power from the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau to the NFB, the artistic and political background of some of the key NFB founders and filmmakers during its early years, the NFB’s method of film distribution, and the paradoxical role played by the government and how it allowed for this discourse to materialize.

While several Canadian artists working in areas such as writing, painting, and theatre were already part of the cultural climate that emerged during the years of increased social and political activism of the late 1920s to the late 1930s, there were no indications that a similar group was forming in the area of filmmaking. Irrespective of the reasons behind this lack of direct involvement of Canadian filmmakers or film practices in the cultural activities of the left during the earlier years of Canadian cinema – we should not underestimate the extent to which the marginalized position of Canadian film production itself in this period might have contributed to this lack of involvement – the fact is that before John Grierson began to put together the NFB’s production team, there were no signals of any Canadian filmmakers or artists using

film to deal with or promote a labour or working-class perspective on the issues of the day. However, as we saw in earlier chapters, the NFB was created at a historical moment when a working-class-based and socialist-oriented political and cultural environment had already taken hold among important groups of Canadian intellectuals and artists. The influence of Popular Front policy pronouncements – particularly its emphasis on uniting the effort to fight fascism, to defend democracy, and to support workers and their role in advancing the cause of social change – added a further ingredient to the front's role as a new mass working-class-based and led historical bloc.

There is no doubt that the changing political priorities of the Canadian government vis-à-vis the war in Europe, and its eventual support for mobilizing workers for the war effort against fascism (clearly, the government saw this mobilization as serving its own political agenda on the war), played a major role in giving legitimacy to a fundamental ingredient of a Popular Front policy. However, the NFB's own institutional dynamics were variously and increasingly influenced by the radicalization of many intellectuals both inside and outside Canada. The new cultural atmosphere in the country shaped how NFB films dealt with working-class politics, and eventually how those films became informed by the discourse of the Popular Front.

## **FROM THE MOTION PICTURE BUREAU TO THE NFB**

Originally, the National Film Board was established as a coordinating and supervising agency. While the Act that founded the Film Board, and which Grierson helped to draft, did not give the Board any given production role, there were in fact no official constraints imposed on the NFB against the institution's own ambitions in this regard. What happened is that the NFB had no authority over the actual production of films; film production remained the responsibility of the twenty-year-old Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB), headed at the time by military Captain Frank Badgley. The transfer of responsibilities between the two agencies occurred in 1941 after a struggle from which John Grierson, the appointed head of the NFB, came out the clear winner.

Although the CGMPB was an operation of the Ministry of Trade and Commerce, various film projects were determined greatly by other government bodies such as the Department of Agriculture. Later, John Grierson cited the effects of such bureaucratic hurdles and complications among the reasons behind his push for the centralization of government film production. His recommendation was to create a committee that

would become the National Film Board of Canada. This committee would reinforce government filmmaking beyond the current limitations of the Motion Picture Bureau. The Board eventually assumed responsibility for the government's dissemination of wartime information as a government agency and as a film production unit. It also replaced the Motion Picture Bureau and absorbed its staff members.<sup>2</sup>

The transfer of power from the CGMPB to the NFB had its own political significance. It signalled the economic and political establishment's recognition of the Board's relative autonomy. This autonomy gave the NFB a certain leeway, which later allowed it to produce a body of films that largely offered a Popular Front vision, rather than solely the government's take on issues relating to working-class politics. However, the transfer of power between these two government agencies did not occur without a major battle. During this battle, Grierson offered a letter of resignation to the Chairman of the Film Board. In a letter dated November 27, 1940, Grierson complained that bureaucratic mentality presented a major obstacle to the goals set for the war mobilization:

Most governments are finding it necessary to use increasingly such media as radio and film, and everywhere one notices the same tug-of-war. On the one hand, the Civil Servants with their formalities of government regulation; on the other hand, the creative people protesting that Civil Service procedure weakens the vitality and paralyzes the initiative which are necessary for good work. One notices that wherever the weight of influence has lain with the civil Service, the spark has gone out and the use of the creative media has not been remarkable.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Grierson retracted his resignation, and the outcome of the battle was finally determined when, on 11 June 1941, the federal government issued an order in council converting authority over the Motion Picture Bureau to the National Film Board of Canada. Grierson's success in this initial confrontation set the stage for his relative autonomy over the NFB's operations and allowed him significant creative and administrative control over the publicly funded agency. Coincidentally, Grierson's victory in getting the government's nod of approval occurred within a few days of Hitler's launch of Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941.

This event signalled the emergence of the new Soviet-Western alliance, particularly after Churchill came to power in Britain and eventually declared that anyone who fought Hitler was an ally. It also helped end the first phase of the war, which was largely labelled as the "phony war." Today, the phrase "phony war" commonly refers to the Western Front from September 1939 to May 1940, when Anglo-French and German

forces faced each other across fixed lines and almost no military activity occurred while the Germans were busy in Poland then later Norway. Germans, in a rare moment of levity, referred to this period as the “Sitzkrieg.” However, and as far as the left at the time was concerned, this phrase described what it saw as the lack of seriousness in how the west was conducting its battle against fascism. As we will see in our later analysis of the Board’s films, the involvement of the Soviet Union in the war would enhance the propagation of a Popular Front view on the role of labour in fighting fascism, including an implicit verdict of the west’s earlier lack of seriousness in fighting fascism.

An important aspect of Grierson’s own difference with the CGMPB was his dismay at the agency’s reluctance to recognize its acute responsibility in fighting fascism. For Grierson, CGMPB’s head Frank Badgley represented “a recalcitrant bureaucrat who didn’t seem to realize there was a war on.”<sup>4</sup> In hindsight, this was neither a far-fetched accusation by Grierson, nor, for that matter, a politically innocent one. For many activists on the left, Canadian and western political establishments were conceived as phony in their fight against fascism. By 1940, the term *Phony War* was widely used by the left to refer to what they saw as the non-serious manner in which the West was conducting its war against Germany. Describing how the British establishment conceived of its war against Germany up until that point, Basil Wright for example writes:

It was the period of the phony war, and the so-called Ministry of Information [in Britain] was being run by hard-nosed, soft-headed Conservative bureaucrats who were determined to do nothing to help the war effort. They also put a memorandum to all government departments saying that everybody in documentary was a communist.<sup>5</sup>

However, the newly created alliance with the Soviet Union became critical in changing the NFB’s film discourse both on the war and on labour. It became an important framework within which this discourse complemented the ideas of the Popular Front on a wide range of social and political issues including those related to the working class. Grierson’s assumption of control over the CGMPF signalled a symbolic victory over the more conservative members of the Canadian cultural establishment, some of whom (as we saw earlier in our discussion of the film institutions of the mid-1930s) might have had a soft spot as far as their feelings towards fascism were concerned.

## THE GRIERSON TEAM AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL ACTIVISM

There is no evidence of any direct influence by left-wing activists in the arena of Canadian film production activity prior to the establishment of the NFB. Yet, the creation of the NFB occurred during a period of increased artistic and intellectual involvement in working-class and left politics in Canada. Furthermore, the importation of a mostly foreign group of intellectuals and filmmakers to help set up the NFB's operation – many of whom had variable levels of familiarity and sympathy with, and in some cases direct involvement in left-wing politics – could not have been a neutral element in how NFB films eventually perceived the local and international politics of the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In 1938, at the invitation of the Canadian government, documentary filmmaker John Grierson was brought to Canada to assess the government's film production activity. His report became the pretext that led to creation of the NFB. By 1939, the Canadian House of Commons voted on an Act defining the new agency's purpose as the making and distributing of films "designated to help Canadians in all parts of Canada to understand the ways of living and the problems of Canadians in other parts." Grierson was appointed as Canada's first Film Commissioner.<sup>6</sup>

There are, however, paradoxes associated with John Grierson's politics and ideology and his role within the NFB. For example, while Grierson's position as an administrator of a government agency influenced his method of work and made him at times appear heavy-handed in his control, his vision of the NFB as a tool to address social issues became a positive factor that contributed to the agency's function as a collective and as a bearer of grassroots-oriented political discourse.

The Act which initiated the creation of the NFB complemented Grierson's own emphasis in respect to issues of social responsibility. It provided a base which supported Grierson's interest in social problems and modified the government's earlier preoccupation with battling American influence over Canada's national culture and values.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Grierson had no qualms about making his views clear on the issue of nationalism. As far as he was concerned, it was "the curse of the nations that every one of them should be so insistent on its own unique and special virtues."<sup>8</sup> For Grierson, rejecting nationalist views comprised an important aspect of political thinking. It was also an element of tension in his relationship with the Canadian political establishment. As we will note later, while this tension was not allowed to surface during the initial

years of the NFB, it certainly became one of the points which haunted Grierson during his later unceremonious departure from Canadian public service.

Grierson's views on national identity, and on defining the role of the NFB in the context of a cordial relationship with the United States, have been the subject of some the criticisms by Canadian film scholars including, as we earlier saw, Joyce Nelson. Once again, it is the kind of criticism that mainly stems from failing to appreciate the historical moment within which Grierson and the NFB were operating. What such criticisms fail to acknowledge, for example, is how the subject of nationalism in the 1930s played politically in conjunction with the rise of fascism. The main argument by people on the left against fascism was that it accentuated nationalism as a basis for oppressing people and to substitute for social protest. In this regard the left argued that the nationalist rhetoric itself was a tool in the hands of the ruling classes to combat the rising influence of the working class and its political parties.

The battle against fascism shifted the focus of the left away from what might have been, under different circumstances, a more accommodating attitude towards the positive aspects of the national question, for example, in connection with issues of anti-colonial struggle and national self-determination. But, the liberation potential of national struggles during this particular period was more or less largely limited to combating colonialism in underdeveloped countries (the 1937 Japanese invasion of China constituted one example of such struggle), while attempts to use nationalist rhetoric in the context of advanced capitalist societies (most of which were basically imperialist countries themselves) seemed problematic. Furthermore, nationalism for the most part was already a political domain that was being used by fascist parties and groups in many advanced capitalist countries as a pretext for fomenting racial and ethnic hatred.

The political agenda of labour and the political left in Britain and Canada focused on the social aspect of fighting fascism and its nationalist rhetoric. In this context, people like Grierson were uncomfortable with the idea of stressing national identity. Instead, their interest lay in addressing social problems and concerns including those relating to the working classes. While the NFB's output under Grierson was aimed at nation building, these films' perspective vis-à-vis the idea of nation building did not subscribe to narrow royalist chauvinisms. Instead, NFB films conceived of Canada's national identity as one in process. In one of his speeches Grierson discussed his outlook on this issue:

Canada is a young nation which has not yet found herself but is to-day in the exciting process of doing so. I like to think that the breathless reception given the

King and Queen for the first time a ceremonial opportunity of raising her young national face to the sunlight.<sup>9</sup>

But what contemporary artists and social activists admired most about Grierson was what they saw as his ability to venture beyond intellectual ivory towers and get closer to the day-to-day problems of average people. Grierson's work in Britain, particularly his work at the General Post Office, became an example of his capacity to use film to depict the working-class subject. In 1937, citing Grierson's role in the production of *Industrial Britain*, *Coalface*, *Housing Problems*, and *Night Mail* among others, filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti expressed esteem for Grierson's contribution to forging a neo-realist movement in cinema:

In England, Grierson, who bore the full moral responsibility of the [neo-realist] movement on his shoulders, began quite simply by trying to be useful; and Marxist doctrines certainly supported him. The sad history of the avant-garde's errors cannot be rehearsed here: Grierson had his entourage make documentaries on fishermen, or craftsmen, on subjects taken at last from reality.<sup>10</sup>

Under Grierson's leadership within British film circles of the 1930s, the role of the filmmaker assumed a new dimension: that of the social activist. As Jim Beveridge points out in reference to the climate within which Grierson developed and worked, filmmakers were "informed and impelled by a feeling of obligation to 'put things right' – the 'things' being problems such as social and economic injustice, those wrongs within society the continuing existence of which became more and more galling and dangerous as frustrations grew at home and fascism grew on the continent of Europe and elsewhere."<sup>11</sup>

But Grierson's views did not sit well with the British ruling class, which was glad when he eventually decided to leave Britain for Canada. The Ministry of Information in Britain was itself run by conservative bureaucrats who were more interested in cleaning up government departments of what they saw as communists than in fighting fascism.<sup>12</sup> Grierson's interest in tackling issues of social justice and in linking them to the fight against fascism took shape during a period when ideological dichotomies were sharply splitting the views of intellectuals both inside and outside the realm of cultural practice. His own views on the use of film as a social agitator have their roots in an eclectic incorporation of socialist ideas and his personal interest in working-class politics. A student colleague, Charles Dand, describes Grierson's early interest in Marxism and the Russian Revolution:

He was a great admirer of Lenin and Trotsky, more of the latter. He was more interested than most of us in the tremendous social experiment then starting in Russia. None of us, however, ever thought of labelling him as a Communist . . . It was not the methods of organization and government that seemed to draw him, but the hopes the Russian experiment raised of a power-house of reconstruction, a new release and orientation of human energies. It was this conception of revolutionary possibilities that he found in Trotsky, and it was one of the inspirations of his approach to documentary film. Another was his feeling of kinship with the miners and farm-workers among whom he had grown up as a boy and the sailors and fishermen with whom he had lived and worked during his war service and which was also evident in his student days.<sup>13</sup>

Formally, Grierson's interest in the work of early Soviet filmmakers was among the formative elements of cinema's appeal for him. The 1929 film *Drifters*, a film which was the most associated with Grierson's name and which he himself directed and produced, largely reflected the formal experimentations of early Soviet filmmakers. The film itself was chosen to accompany *The Battleship Potemkin* at the premier presentation of the Soviet film in London.<sup>14</sup> Grierson's aesthetic vision that shaped his attention to documentary film practice was also informed by other elements in working-class and socialist culture, including the related theatre movement that grew in Europe in the 1920s:

[this movement recaptured] the general principles of documentary theatre as it first evolved in Germany in the 1920s, mainly through the work of Irwin Piscator. It was in reference to Piscator's "epic theatre" that Brecht first applied the word "documentary" to the theatre in 1926 – in the same year that John Grierson coined the word in English to describe the films of Robert Flaherty.<sup>15</sup>

Later on, early NFB films produced under the auspices of John Grierson became the first Canadian films to publicly acknowledge and inadvertently make use of the theory and techniques that were laid down both by socialist-oriented filmmakers of the French avant-garde and by the early Soviet montage school.

On the political level, Grierson contributed to the activities of the communist-inspired workers' film movement. This movement sought to provide a theoretical pretext for the creation of a working-class film discourse. Grierson, for example, was among the star participants in the London Workers' Film Society's (LWFS) first summer school. The Marxist press commented on the school's presentations and

discussions, and praised their success in “thrashing out the ideological as well as the practical basis for the Workers’ film Movement in Britain.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Grierson always saw more in film than the commodity profit value imposed in the context of capitalist production relations:

To some, it is “the film business,” which is to say, a business like any other, making profits. Profits depend on the box office and a carefully calculated estimate of what people in the theatre are hungry for: sex and heroism, comedy and adventure, day dreams and romance.<sup>17</sup>

For Grierson, the use of film complemented the work of the social activist in exploring and intervening in social and political struggles. It also provided a forum to encourage public discussion of those issues. Within this framework “Grierson liked to describe his politics as ‘one inch to the left’ of the government’ in office.” It was also within this framework that he later began to recruit his NFB colleagues and workers, citing the need to build “a school of progressive (or left-wing, depending upon whose characterizations were involved) young film makers.”<sup>18</sup>

I do not, however, suggest that Grierson’s early interest in Marxist ideas, the Russian Revolution, the experiments of Soviet filmmakers and his preoccupation with social issues indicated some sort of commitment to Marxism or to Marxist politics. Neither do I suggest that his work fully agreed with the views of the Communist International (related accusations later did surface when Grierson became the subject of an FBI investigation in the mid-1940s). At best, Grierson’s commitment to leftist and Marxist politics was eclectic and always considerate of the fine lines that were to be walked in order to remain compatible with his job as a government official. As contemporary filmmaker Joris Ivens attests (Ivens worked with Grierson during the early years of the NFB), what informed Grierson’s passion for making films that were conscious of social issues also accommodated a spiritual ideological aspect to it:

He’s a man who was very well read, he read Marx, Lenin, Mao Tse-tung. And sometimes he was a strange man, eh? When he saw a Communist, he quoted the Bible, and when he saw Catholics, he quoted Lenin. I only say that to characterize Grierson, because he was a man who knew a lot, but who, as I said before, went less far in his work.<sup>19</sup>

Grierson’s eclectic approach is best exemplified in how he saw the world “entering upon a new and interim society which is neither capitalist nor socialist but in which we can

achieve central planning without loss of individual initiative... in which public unity and discipline can be achieved without forgetting the human virtues.”<sup>20</sup> However, this seemingly paradoxical view did fit well with the non-sectarian approach of working-class politics as advocated by the Communist Party at the time, but without the latter’s conception of this mixture of social systems as an early stage which would pave the way for subsequent socialist transformation. This view that was politically centrist, yet remained at least open to considering socialism as a possible alternative, eventually became the heart of the working-class oriented discourse of a significant number of early NFB films.

Popular Front policies sought to galvanize a heterogeneous social and political movement which went beyond the limitations of class and sectarian party politics and was able to initiate a broad democratic anti-fascist historical bloc. As such, the policies of the front created the basis for an inclusive counter-hegemonic movement. Citing how Grierson himself saw his role in the context of such a movement, Rodrigue Chiasson recalls a conversation with Grierson:

I asked him, in the course of our conversations, how deliberately he had set out to nurture and develop the documentary-film movement. He replied, “you’d better believe that it was deliberate, and it wasn’t just making films, whatever that is. It was social movement.”<sup>21</sup>

With this vision, Grierson set out to put together his team to carry out the task of building the NFB.

Several participants in Grierson’s NFB team were members of the British documentary film movement, the group that he was active with before he came to Canada. They included the young and well trained team of Stuart Legg, Evelyn Spice, J.D. Davidson, Stanley Hawes, Basil Wright and Raymond Spottiswoode as well as film animator Norman McLaren. In turn this group of experienced filmmakers trained several Canadian apprentices such as James Beveridge, Tom Daly, and Louis Applebaum. The staff of the NFB quickly grew from a five-member team at the initial stage to more than eight hundred people by 1945.<sup>22</sup>

Among the key talents hired by Grierson was Stuart Legg. A pioneer of the British film documentary tradition, Legg became the second in command in Grierson’s production unit and came to direct sixteen and produce forty-one films for the Board in the period between 1939 and 1945. Describing the atmosphere within which he undertook the task of producing early NFB films, Legg delineated the shadow of the crisis that was hanging over advanced capitalist countries at the time: “it was a

complicated situation moving into possibly revolutionary situation. There was the Depression, there was enormous unemployment, with the whole economy rather undermined, and so on.”<sup>23</sup> He then described the political and intellectual climate which influenced his and the views of youth:

It was a situation where the opinions of young people were formulated to address the possibilities of fundamental economic and political change, and what many of them moved towards was the left of the political spectrum: Young people were left in those days, probably more orthodoxly so than now [1978]. That’s all there is to say about it.<sup>24</sup>

Just two years before he joined the Motion Picture Bureau, Legg, in association with the British communist writer F.D. Klingender, contributed to what amounted to be the first comprehensive attempt to write a Marxist interpretation of the economics of the film industry between the wars (the 1937 book, titled *Money Behind the Screen*, is currently out of print and available only through the book collection of the Communist Party of Britain, the New Communist Party of Britain, and private book collections of party members).

Another of Grierson’s colleagues in the early years of the NFB was Joris Ivens. The Dutch filmmaker worked at the Board in 1943 directing and producing the film *Action Stations* (the film was also produced in another version titled *Corvette Port Arthur*). Ivens’s early work included the late 1920s filming of revolutionary events in cooperation with the workers’ newsreel movement in his native Holland. He later went on to work in a variety of projects including documenting issues and problems of socialist construction in the Soviet Union in 1932. Ivens later directed the now infamous documentary on the Spanish Civil War, *Spanish Earth* (1937). The film involved wide artistic and political support from left-wing intellectuals in the United States such as Lillian Hellman.

Ivens’s account of his own work as a filmmaker subscribes to an approach which stresses the fusion of cinematic practice with political and social activism. This, he argued, only occurred in the context of revolutionizing the means of film practice:

I started more from the aesthetic, artistic point of view. I was part of the avant-gardist movement in Europe, with Paris, with Berlin – then into this artistic movement came realism. That was the influence of the Russian film-makers such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko. And my work was also influenced by the work of Flaherty. And then with these realisms I started to associate myself with

the social problems of my own country and other countries in Europe, and I made a film about the coal miners' strike in Belgium. I was for the workers and for the strike.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, many of the activists from the earlier years of the 1930s drifted to the NFB. Among those were Hazen Sise, P.K. Page, Guy Glover, Irene Baird, Mavis Gallant, as well as Lawrence Cherry and Evelyn Spice Cherry, both of whom made numerous films at the NFB during the war years. Earlier films made by the Cherrys before they joined the NFB included material that was already manifesting elements that expressed social and class consciousness and preoccupation. Two important films made for the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool in 1940 come to mind here: *New Horizons* and *By Their Own Strength*.

However, Grierson's own fixation with creating a socially conscious film institution transcended the recruitment of filmmakers. He made a concerted effort to recruit artists and other workers who saw their task at the Board as more than a job. According to Louis Applebaum, a musician who wrote the scores for hundreds of the early NFB films:

The government looked upon us as not only outsiders, but also as potential rebels. The word "Communist" was associated with all kinds of people at the Film Board, almost from day one. I don't remember whether we ever went through an RCMP check to get the job, but Grierson was grabbing people right and left – people who had a social conscience and had the energy to do something about society . . . The more activist they were, the better film-makers they were going to be. They were going to generate public involvement in what was going on.<sup>26</sup>

The NFB Commissioner sought people who saw filmmaking as means to promote social and economic justice, and did that in spite of the bureaucratic unease about his approach.

On another level, largely among NFB workers and technicians, the Communist Party itself seem to have had some actual organized presence, but this can only be corroborated through second-hand accounts. Marjorie McKay, an employee of the NFB at the time, claims that aside from the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people who worked in the Board were social activists, there were also at least two party cells within the NFB by the early 1940s.<sup>27</sup> Yet, while communists might have indeed become active within the NFB, ideas about the role of film as social agitator were clearly influencing people beyond party circles. The political and ideological framework for how NFB films saw the war against fascism and the building of a society based on

collective democratic values and international cooperation and peace was largely being informed by broad discursive formations that were galvanizing numerous artists and intellectuals both inside and outside the NFB.

## **SCREENING FILM ON THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL**

The logistics of bringing a film to its intended audience was for Grierson as critical as the message it put forward. Grierson allotted major efforts to providing an effective base for distributing and screening NFB films. Eventually the Board designed and implemented a networking system that reached a large cross-section of urban and rural communities. The manner in which the NFB films were screened became in itself part of the board's strategy of making film responsive to the needs and concerns of its audience. One important aspect of this strategy was screening films on the grassroots community level and having them discussed and debated by audiences. Working-class, rural, and citizen film circuits created by the NFB by the early 1940s (and later renamed the Volunteer Projection Services) provided forums for hundreds of thousands of Canadians to view and discuss political and social issues raised in the films.

Clearly, Grierson understood that the NFB's success was not simply contingent on producing films. Among the most important challenges for Grierson was to make sure that films reached their targeted audience, and that they eventually made some impact on their understanding of the issues that were being discussed. At a time when television was not yet widely available to households in North America, film was already a major mass communication tool. Film therefore was the only moving picture medium that was widely accessible to the general public, and Grierson realized this very well. The NFB's success in bringing its films to where people could conveniently view and discuss them represented an atypical approach from what Canadians were used to when they watched them in commercial theatrical outlets. John Grierson advocated using film as an information tool and as a means to create a two-way communication connection between the people and the state. This meant inspiring rather than preaching to people.

In an effort to publicize NFB films, Grierson built upon an already growing film exhibition practice in Canada. During the 1920s and 1930s, private companies as well as cooperative movements were already utilizing rural film screening circuits.<sup>28</sup> Local film societies in urban centres such as Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa, were also beginning to organize their own screening of films that were not successful in reaching commercial theatres.<sup>29</sup>

Grierson instructed Donald Buchanan, the director of the Central Government Distribution Service to help form and expand cross-Canada non-theatrical circuits to screen the material produced by the NFB. Buchanan eventually developed an innovative non-theatrical system of distribution and screening which worked outside of the commercial movie theatre outlets. It involved showing films to groups such as working-class unions, farm workers, and other smaller rural communities and centres. Films were shown indoors, or, weather permitting, outdoors. In many cases, film screenings allowed communities to come together in a picnic-like atmosphere, which involved, in addition to having fun, watching the film and discussing it, and an opportunity to meet each other and discuss their collective concerns. Considering that the films shown were themselves developed with such communities in mind, these films allowed “people to see people like them, rather than the Hollywood never-never land of fantasy.”<sup>30</sup> As workers from the Board attended the screenings and led the discussions on the films, meetings virtually became exercises in grassroots democratic participation and in proactive use of cinema. While there were plans to carry these events into the post-war period by way of stimulating discussions on issues of social economic reconstruction, the changing political climate was beginning to shift in another direction. As Whitaker and Marcuse suggest, as “exciting as their ideas were to many Canadians, to others, powerful persons among them, they were subversive and revolutionary notions.”<sup>31</sup>

By mid-1942 the number of travelling circuits within rural communities rose to forty-three, with a monthly viewing audience of up to quarter million people.<sup>32</sup> Each circuit was assigned the monthly task of presenting films in twenty rural schools, village halls and other public community sites, and to return the same day of the next month for another screening to the same community.<sup>33</sup> Considering that the majority of the rural population at the time had no access to any kind of theatrical screening, the task undertaken by the NFB represented a monumental leap in bringing film to a substantial number of new Canadian audience. After the films were screened, debates followed, with discussion notes and leaflets provided by NFB employees.<sup>34</sup> While most of the information was “used to develop effective propaganda campaigns,” nevertheless,

The schemes were intrinsically difficult to control from the center because of the geographical distances involved. Open debate often broke out around issues raised in the films shown, and the screenings also functioned as social events, allowing locals, as opposed to national, concerns to be aired.<sup>35</sup>

NFB distributors paid special attention to bringing those films to people of working-class background. The success of such endeavours relied on creating a structured link with the labour movement and its activists on the grassroots level.

The NFB specifically co-sponsored a labour-based National Trade Union film circuit, which involved the Trades and Labour Congress, the Canadian Congress of Labour, and the Workers Education Association.<sup>36</sup> The program was officially inaugurated in January 1943. The labour film circuits functioned in a similar manner to the Board's rural circuits. Leaders and activists from major unions helped prepare and mobilize for the screenings.<sup>37</sup> The films were screened between September and May "as part of the branch activity of the trade union movement," and were conducted in union halls "partly on company time partly on lunch breaks and/or between work shifts."<sup>38</sup> All together, there were more than sixty-six NFB traveling projectionists serving in the industrial and trade union film circuits. Those projectionists covered more than 300 union locals in eighty-four districts across Canada, and a total of 385,000 factory workers every month.<sup>39</sup> This, however, could not have been achieved without a concerted effort and support on the part of activists on the grassroots level.

Organized labour played a critical role in initiating and encouraging the screening of NFB films. By the early 1940s, the most active elements within the trade union movement were in full support of the war effort and the work of the Wartime Information Board. Labour support was expressed "not only through their union membership, but also through other related community agencies."<sup>40</sup>

The screening of NFB films among working-class and rural communities became part of concerted national political efforts. Activists from the labour and left movements made a major effort to mobilize in support of the war in Europe, particularly after 1941 when the Soviet Union entered the war, a war they also saw as one in defence of democracy, labour rights, and in favour of the cooperative reorganization of society.

With Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in mid-1941, militant labour leadership in coordination with the Communist-Labour Total War Committees organized a Canada-wide mobilization in support of the war against fascism.<sup>41</sup> The activities by those committees provided a stronger political and organizational base for the working class's direct involvement in the war effort. It also facilitated a wide grassroots buttress for linking the NFB film circuits with a large number of the audience they were aiming to reach.

By 1945, members of three hundred union locals in eighty-four districts were attending regular screenings and discussions of NFB films. The films offered a new outlook on the nature and the importance of unity in the war against fascism and its significance for working-class Canadians. The films also rejuvenated an atmosphere

of optimism about the future. They contemplated the possibility of establishing a new cooperative society to replace the chaotic past of war and the Great Depression. Doris Rands, whose husband was fired from the NFB during the Cold War purges, offers a picture of this mood:

My husband, Stan, worked in adult education in Manitoba and used the films of the NFB as tools for community organizing, farm organizing, and all kinds of grassroots work.... I remember people used to stay up all night talking about what could be done around the Film Board and what good could be done with documentary films. When the purge happened they stopped doing that and the atmosphere around the NFB changed from high creativity and optimism to caution and fear.<sup>42</sup>

Most films stressed the central role of working people in the growth of Canadian industry and in the development of the country's natural resources. They pointed to the impact of manual work in the success of the war effort in Europe and in the preparation for post-war rebuilding. Films' themes included unemployment, recreational programs, rehabilitation, industrial development, labour safety, labour-management coordination, and international relations.

As a result of this concerted effort and even without counting the above-mentioned considerable non-theatrical audience, Canadian weekly attendance for NFB war films is claimed to have reached one-third of the entire Canadian population.<sup>43</sup> This, no doubt, contributed to the organic function of these films, and made a major impact on the way they operated as part of a larger counter-hegemonic movement. This organic role did not simply relate to the themes and views that were presented by these films, but also to their grassroots impact, including the participation of working people in discussions around the social and political issues that were being presented.

Film discussions offered people further opportunities to raise their own views on the social and political issues of the day. As such, the NFB film circuits opened new venues for interactive communication about the films; they became nuclei for political interaction on the grassroots level. Eventually, this process solidified even further the functionary role of these films as organs for political activism and organization.

Many of the films, particularly those aimed at labour groups, included special discussion trailers that proposed ways to follow up on the issues that they dealt with. Those trailers also involved the participation of ordinary trade unionists giving their point of view on the film being discussed and often indulged the audience by

posing questions for further discussion. In a way, the films were entwined with union education work and became integral to the political culture of working-class people.

In a 1944 article about the policy of encouraging discussion among the audience, Donald Buchanan, who was in charge of expanding the distribution of NFB film in non-theatrical outlets, stresses that the idea was to move the audience to a higher stage of interaction which itself would make a film live beyond the immediacy of its screening:

That is how the value of the Canadian documentary movie appears, not as an entity in itself, but as part of a larger entity. Those who direct, photograph, edit, and prepare a film for 16 mm distribution, are only the first participants in its creation as a living object. The men and women who finally bring it to life and useful activity are those who project that particular movie; in some small hall, some factory or club room, and so relate its values to local needs and aspiration.<sup>44</sup>

The ultimate goal, Buchanan points out, was to spur people to group activity and action in their dealing with the issues discussed in the films.

On one occasion, an NFB field representative filed a report describing how six local citizens took the platform with him after the screening of a film. The viewers initiated a half-hour intermission discussion, in which “criticism was not lacking,” but was also “quite intelligent and the discussions always took a decidedly positive direction. Very constructive consideration of social issues came to the fore.” Similar reports by NFB representatives were regular, and they allowed Grierson and his staff “to keep their fingers on the pulse of public opinion and to measure, in part, the effect of the NFB’s propaganda.”<sup>45</sup>

By allowing people to provide their own critical viewpoint on the films and their subjects, the films became tools for proactive education. As such, films sought to advance views rather than preach them. They also encouraged ideas about democratic practice within the workplace and in relation to political life in the country. Gary Evans compares this process to Marshall McLuhan’s vision of the global village:

This was a way of making citizens part of the active democratic process. Grierson’s idea of totalitarian propaganda, the two-way communication between the governing and the governed, was an application of what Marshall McLuhan would later call the “global village” concept. Film, education, and discussion linked the human-ness and one-ness of the individual human being in his own environment with the world as a whole.<sup>46</sup>

But while comparing McLuhan's vision of the global village to how Grierson saw the function and the role of interactive communication is debatable, what is more certain is that those who advocated Popular Front policies made substantial efforts to champion the use of interactive forms of cultural practice. As we saw earlier, by the late 1930s ideas about using art as a tool for social and political action were already integral to labour and left-wing cultural practices in Canada. Indeed, Popular Front policy supporters conceived of these practices as genuine alternatives to what they viewed as one-sided bourgeois manipulation of media and film.

## THE PARADOXICAL ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

One of the paradoxes of the counter-hegemonic function of the NFB films during the war years is how they effectively pioneered this remarkable effort, considering that the NFB was, after all, the propaganda agency of a capitalist government that was not even social-democratic in orientation. Therefore, to understand how the discourse of early NFB films on the working-class came to exist, one also needs to account for the way this discourse complemented, yet modified for its own purposes, the fundamentally different political goals of the Canadian government.

As we saw earlier, the government had already recognized the importance of film as a political propaganda tool capable of shaping public opinion. It had also recognized the futility of trying to compete with the American film production giants for any major share or control over the feature film production industry. On another level, the Canadian film industry itself was now content with controlling the lion's share of the film distribution and theatre market. By the time the National Film Board of Canada was officially created in 1939, the idea of launching an educational vehicle to promote the views of the government to Canadians was widely accepted within the Canadian political establishment. For Canadian film producers, and since the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB) did not have its own production facilities and the NFB was not yet supposed to be producing films, the idea of getting government contracts to produce educational films represented a viable alternative under the circumstances. Little those producers knew in 1939 about Grierson's intention to have the Board become the main producer of most government films. Grierson's final battle with the (CGMPB) sealed this role for the NFB by 1941.

The government's tolerance of the NFB's advocacy of a proactive role for labour can be partially traced to the interest in mobilizing public support for the war. In addition,

the government was conscious of the need to defuse any potential labour and social tensions, both during and after the war (i.e. in the context of reintegrating workers into the post-war social and economic restructuring process). The main framework for the NFB's mission between 1939 and 1945 – at least as far as the government was concerned – was to support the war effort, and later to help ease the process of reintegrating servicemen into civilian life.<sup>47</sup> The films produced by the NFB might have gone further in what they professed politically but they certainly did not contradict or present, as such, any hindrance to the government's overall objective.

As we saw earlier, a level of consensus within the Canadian establishment over the role of government as an educator was already manifest in the pronouncements of Canadian cultural institutions such as the National Council of Education and the National Film Society. In itself, such a role was not necessarily contradictory to the goals set by the Grierson team in the NFB. What differentiated this team's own agenda from that of the establishment was in defining what constituted an educational government role, and what goals the government wanted to stress in an educational film. The definition was eventually left to Grierson to elaborate and to implement. Grierson himself would later pay the price for implanting his own interpretations when it came to educational goals and practices.

In addition to its war preoccupations and its interest in maintaining social peace in the country, the Liberal government's non-confrontational attitude towards labour can be linked also to the fact that labour's role and strength were already part of the new reality in Canadian politics. As I mentioned earlier, a critical factor in the Liberal Party's success in the 1935 elections against the Conservatives directly related to its denunciation of Prime Minister Bennett's belligerent and confrontational attitude towards labour and the unemployed in the early and mid-1930s. Acknowledging the role of labour as part of new Canadian political scene was not only necessary, but also crucial for implementing the government's own war-mobilization strategy.

Another factor that might have influenced the government's tolerance towards the NFB relates to the personal and political agenda of Prime Minister King himself. King's own personal insecurities might have alerted him to the role of the Board as a potential publicity tool. In this regard, the pressures of the war and King's related personal political ambitions might have had an impact on how he eventually decided to give the NFB a relatively free creative hand. As Gary Evans suggests:

Looking at film propaganda and information in total, (Grierson had become head of the Wartime Information Board in 1943) Prime Minister King and his Government may have been convinced that what Grierson was doing was

worthwhile in the context of the war. Besides, the Prime Minister was benefiting from frequent publicity which disguised his usual awkward manner before the public – Opposition critics had complained that images of King Government propaganda were as numerous as the posterity of Abraham! More likely, the King Government was too busy to devote time or interest to information policy. In fact, it was amazing what the NFB got away with, Stuart Legg admitted years later.<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, the Board did not hurt King politically, and, if anything, helped him sustain a level of support that could only gain from the publicity offered by some NFB films. However, while the parameters of the protracted struggle between the views of the working class and those of the economic and government elite on the political issues of the day assumed a less confrontational appearance, the ideological dichotomies that separated those two views remained well defined.

On the one hand, there was the establishment's perspective, which advocated a nationalist-oriented emphasis on the role of government in educating its citizens. This essentially subscribed to urging these citizens to solve their problems individually and in the spirit of capitalist free will. This vision did not necessarily contradict the parochial (and mostly rhetorical) liberal pronouncements about creating a socially more just society. On the other hand, there was the counter-hegemonic outlook, which claimed and upheld a grassroots cooperative political vision of society. This outlook found its strength and support within a broad working-class-based political, social, and cultural movement. As I will illustrate later, the NFB films' discourse in connection with the two views was anything but neutral.

The concord that characterized the relationship between the NFB's administration and the government during the war was not entirely devoid of sporadic confrontations. While the Board's films appeared not to contradict the government's policy in mobilizing support for the war effort, the social and political messages implicated in those films and the manner in which they practically brought people together on the grassroots level were essentially incompatible with the long-term objectives of the ruling social and political elite. Attacks against Grierson and the NFB during the early years of the Cold War would demonstrate how this establishment implicitly despised the role played by the Board during the war. Within the NFB itself, several filmmakers faced all kinds of institutional pressures. Tom Waugh discusses how filmmaker Joris Ivens, for example, "was not entirely comfortable" with how the NFB handled the editing and the distribution of one of his films.<sup>49</sup> Filmmaker Jane March encountered similar problems in her work on *Women are Warriors*.<sup>50</sup> The difference between the original script prepared by March and the final version of the film was quite vast.

Comparing the two versions illustrates that some NFB filmmakers were insistent on pushing the envelope even further with their class-based analysis, and that by the end they would settle for solutions that accepted the limitations associated with working within a government agency.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, NFB filmmakers were largely successful and effective in forwarding messages that interacted with alternate dynamics within Canadian political culture. A critical element in Popular Front policy stressed the need to support the war against fascism as part of a heterogeneous effort based on a wide class alliance. In other words, this policy measured the success of the working class through its success in forging and leading a mass-based alliance or front; a counter-hegemonic historical bloc. As such, presenting the views of the Popular Front (particularly in support of the war effort) also meant bringing a working-class perspective to the forefront of the struggle around hegemony.

The government and the Popular Front contended over interpreting what fighting fascism and mobilizing people to fight against it meant. They essentially competed to achieve a commonsense consensus around each of their own perspectives towards these issues. The fact that they agreed on the same goals does not change the nature of the struggle between them as one around hegemony. As will be manifested in our reading of the NFB films themselves, these films complemented the broader forms of cultural and political activities that took place during the war but they also built upon earlier working-class actions and struggles that took place in the 1930s and before. The amalgamation of these discursive elements helped establish a certain hegemony (in this case, a counter-hegemony), or cultural dominance of existing institutions and values. As Raymond Williams argued:

I would say that in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective ... what I have in mind is the central, effective and dominant system of meanings and values, which are not merely abstract but which are organized and lived. That is why hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of man and of his world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming.<sup>52</sup>

As a broad pro-labour and anti-fascist political and cultural movement took form and transcended the boundaries of militant working-class activists and the political left,

a significant number of films produced by the NFB became part of a wider course of action which witnessed the labouring of Canadian culture. Eventually the level of activity and the role played by Canadian labour and its supporters on the political left had a vital impact on the ideological paradigm that informed NFB films' depiction of the working class and the manner in which these films were ideologically perceived by this class and other sections of Canadian society. It also helped shape how these films informed and were informed by the politics of fighting fascism, the role of the Soviet Union as a working-class state, and ideas about building a post-war society on the basis of collective utilization and distribution of social and economic resources. In other words, these films became integral to an intellectual stratum associated with a working-class-centred counter-hegemonic historical bloc.