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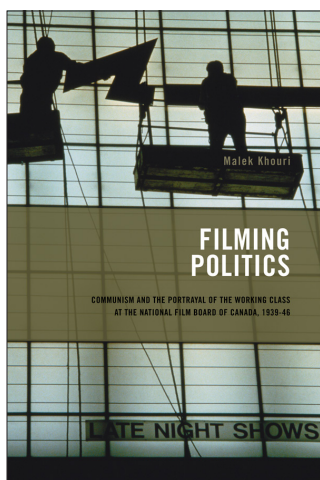
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## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

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## 8 STYLISTIC TRENDS WITHIN THE DISCOURSE OF NFB WAR FILMS

Various stylistic approaches complemented, informed or developed in parallel to NFB films. In conjunction with John Grierson's vigorous search for a new articulation of the role of cinema and documentary in particular, these approaches enhanced the unique contribution made by early NFB films to the evolution of working-class cultural practices in the early twentieth century. This chapter supplements the discussion on the NFB films' utilization of multiple institutional, political, cultural, and stylistic elements that were also part of the left and working-class discourses. This chapter, however, does not offer a comprehensive stylistic analyses of the films referred to in earlier chapters; such a task is well beyond the general framework and scope of this book. The goal here is to demonstrate and more specifically map out yet another dimension in how NFB films informed and were informed (this time stylistically) by left-oriented discourse of the time.

The interactive link between the stylistic approaches and the ideological workings of NFB war films has been largely missing from Canadian film studies. Without going into detail about the reasons behind this failure (I have dealt with some of the reasons in the first chapter of this book), suffice it to say that it originates within the tendency to marginalize contextual, historical and empirical considerations within various cinema and film studies research circles. In fact, critics from Evans to Nelson almost never acknowledged the importance or the significance of such issues to understanding and analyzing NFB war films. Ignoring these components led to dismissing – and/or to considerable misreading – of the stylistic and ideological confluences manifested in NFB films. Ironically, the only historically and ideologically contextualized evaluations of the stylistic dynamics of these films originate from outside the Canadian film studies disciplinary canons. Such discussions, for example, are found in the work of labour historians Gary Whitaker and Reginald Marcuse. The writers offer this assessment of the films:

There was also the question of style. The documentary style of Grierson and his collaborator, Stuart Legg, was very much that of the 1930s and 1940s. Vivid, forceful images of people and things in motion flooded his films: soldiers, workers, the great engines of warfare and production. Staccato musical scores raced from crescendo to crescendo. Narration was stentorian. The deep voice of Lorne Greene boomed out authoritatively on the soundtracks of the *World in Action* and the *Canada Carries on Series*. The narration summed up what the images and sounds together were designed to convey: a didactic message of the travail and triumph of ordinary people the world over in mastering their own destinies.”<sup>1</sup>

By way of expanding the discussion on the nature of the NFB films’ stylistic links and background, this section of the book provides an overview of various stylistic origins and underpinnings that complemented these films’ function on the ideological level.

## **GRIERSON AND THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY FILM MOVEMENT**

There is no doubt that the style of NFB films during the war was influenced by the British documentary film movement, led by Grierson himself in the early 1930s. Eventually, this movement held considerable sway on British film culture in the 1930s and 1940s. What is today referred to as the documentary film movement in Britain involved a group of filmmakers, films and writings from the period between 1927 and 1939. Much of the work of this movement was conducted within two British government film units, the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, and the General Post Office Film Unit. Films were made as part of government service campaigns promoting political and cultural reforms (it is imperative to note here that the British government grudgingly accepted the sympathetic depiction of working-class people within its films; the main concern of the government at that time seemed to be to encourage grassroots support for the international project of the British colonialist empire). Grierson’s influence and leadership within the British documentary movement had a monumental impact on the development of the movement.

British films made by proponents of this movement, however, also bore the signature of film practices associated at the time with various left-oriented filmmakers in Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union. In this regard, Jack C. Ellis specifically refers to a group of films out of which “the aesthetic origins of British

documentary grew,” such as Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (1926), and Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Ellis also cites a group of Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), V. I. Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* (1927) and *Storm Over Asia* (1928), Victor Turin’s *Turksib* (1929), and Alexander Dovzhenco’s *Earth* (1930).<sup>2</sup> Ellis also refers to a book titled *Projection of England* (first published in 1932) by Stephen Tallent. An early participant in the work of the British documentary movement, Tallent explicitly describes the major stylistic impact of Soviet films on the British group:

Through these films we came to appreciate the need for concentrated work in the editing of the raw material. Their “massing of detail,” one of our programmes of that time noted, “the distribution of detail and sequences of rising or falling tempo, the enthusiasm of dramatising working types and working gestures, combine to make their films of work as exciting as any in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

This clear appreciation of the techniques introduced by Soviet filmmakers transcended mere aesthetic interest, and eventually contributed to the creation of a genuine interest in the subject matter and the iconography of these films. Of significant importance to British filmmakers was Soviet cinema’s introduction of a different kind of depiction of people of working-class backgrounds. This interest resulted in the British movement’s incorporation of a similar approach to depicting workers in their own films and publicity material, something that did go well with the British establishment, for which members of the movement were making some of their industrial films. Grierson subsequently recalled:

When the posters of the Buy British Campaign carried for the first time the figure of a working-man as a national symbol, we were astonished at the Empire Marketing Board to hear from half a hundred Blimps that we were “going Bolshevik.” The thought of making work an honoured theme, and a workman, of whatever kind, an honourable figure, is still liable to the charge of subversion. The documentary group has learned freely from Russian film techniques; the nature of the material has forced it to what, from an inexperienced point of view, may seem violent technical developments. These factors have encouraged this reactionary criticism; but fundamentally, the sin has been to make cinema face life; and this must invariably be unwelcome to the complacent elements in society.<sup>4</sup>

Grierson's critical writings during at the time also attest to his early interest in looking at the film camera as a unique instrument for exploring various levels and depths within and without the immediacy of the "realities" that it intends to depict:

The camera-eye is in effect a magical instrument... [its magic] lies... in the manner of its observation, in the strange innocence with which, in a mindtangled world, it sees things for what they are. This is not simply to say that the camera, on its single observations, is free from the trammels of the subjective, for it will not follow the director in his enthusiasms any more than it will follow him in the wide-angled vision of his eyes. The magical fact of the camera is that it picks out what the director does not see at all, that it gives emphasis where he did not think emphasis existed.

The Camera is in a measure both the discoverer of an unknown world and the re-discoverer of a lost one. There are, as everyone knows, strange moments of beauty that leap out of most ordinary news reels. It may be some accidental pose of character or some spontaneous gesture which radiates simply because it is spontaneous.<sup>5</sup>

Grierson's early articulation of the significance of the British movement in the context of its simultaneous incorporation of alternative stylistic and social values would eventually lead to more concrete theorization of the role and aesthetics of documentary filmmaking. Ultimately, Grierson's authority would extend beyond this movement's short-lived existence and would be transformed into a gravitating centre for most of the debates around understanding and defining what constituted a documentary, and how and if film can and should seek to reflect reality.<sup>6</sup> Grierson's stylistic approach would be developed further in the context of his later work outside of Britain, including in the context of his work with filmmakers and artists of the National Film Board of Canada.

## **GRIERSON'S THEORY OF DOCUMENTARY AND THE NFB'S INCORPORATION OF SYMBOLIC EXPRESSIONISM**

Grierson's elaboration of his documentary approach has its critical roots in early writings within local British film journals. In an article titled "First Principles of Documentary"

published in *Cinema Quarterly*, Grierson makes one of his early attempts to define his outlook on the subject:

- (1) We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form... the living scene and the living story.
- (2) We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world.
- (3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article... the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, Grierson's theory on documentary primarily favoured using film as an emblematic illustration: it subordinated naturalistic representation to symbolic expression by way of reflecting upon underlying and subtle realities.

Grierson always stressed what he liked about the term symbolic expressionism, which basically chose the allegorical, rather than the unembroidered images. In the context of his previously noted interest in the iconographic significance of presenting working-class images, Grierson's NFB work reflected similar interest in the symbolic significance of cinematic approximation of work's and worker's iconographic images as being at the centre of world events. This is seen, for example, in his encouragement of visually coupling clips depicting the war front in Europe with those of industrial factories across Canada in many NFB war films. In their portrayal of the variety of ways in which people could contribute to the defeat of fascism, films like *Great Guns* (1942) and *Industrial Workers* (1943) described in detail how the production of steel and pulp in the Great Lakes is transformed into actual weaponry. Both films are charged with a relentless barrage of shots depicting workers as they "mould steel into fighting weaponry" in conjunction with images of war in Europe. In *Churchill's Island* fast-paced footage depicting workers in their factories and farmers in their field, delineates the work of the "men and women who in the time of peace made Britain strong."

The 1940 film *Industrial Workers of Central Canada* uses a similar technique to describe how the area around the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes became the most populated area in the country, and how it came to include the bulk of Canadian industrial labour. As it delineates the operations of large industrial plants, the film uses heavily edited shots of images that demonstrate the dexterity, skill, organization, and the efficacy of workers as they operate huge machinery and transform raw metal into industrial products.

Building on montage techniques, Jane March's films such as *Women are Warriors* (1942) similarly rely on dynamic editing to present symbolic aspects in the history of the gender division of labour and the epic struggles of women to achieve full equality. For its part, Stuart Legg's *Toilers of the Grand Banks* (1940) depicts the hard work of people in the fishing industry. The film first describes how the sunlight, as it strikes through shallow water, stimulates the growth of marine plants in the seabed, providing food and breeding grounds for fish. The film's main theme, however, is the process of labouring, "which stands behind the success of Canada's fishing economy." The film draws a detailed picture of the work performed by the fishermen and shipyard workers on the Canadian east coast. It maintains a thematic dialectic similar to the one advanced in Grierson's earlier film *Drifters*, which also tackled the topic of fishery workers. Both films capture the images of fishermen as they combat and triumph over natural obstacles.

Yet while Grierson relied on montage editing as his main source for delineating the epic magnitude of toiling, Legg, on the other hand, incorporated a different technique. Using long takes to depict workers building schooners to be used later by cod fishermen, Legg mainly relied on long and medium camera shots to give a feel of the epic dimension of the workers' labour and the fishermen's struggle as they ride the heavy seas of the Atlantic. Such optical effects were used efficiently to link between the dialectical interaction of elements within the same frame such as those of the fishing boats, the roaring ocean, and the fishermen on top of the boats. Descriptive information about the fishing work process seemed to be dominated by symbolic camera techniques whose function was to express the struggle of workers as they battle the elements to achieve their goal. Legg reserved cuts to indicate adjoining spaces and to build spatially coherent cinematic progression. The result was another dramatized symbolic depiction of the fishermen's life and labour that was as dialectically charged as any montage-based portrayal.

In their re-contextualization of archival footage many NFB films also offered unabashedly editorial comments on the issues of the day that in some ways challenged epistemological assumptions normally embedded in documentaries. This stemmed from Grierson's emphasis on documentary film as a propagandist tool with explicit social and political goals and functions. In this context, aesthetic considerations were meant to be secondary:

In our world, it is necessary these days to guard against the aesthetic argument.... Documentary was from the beginning – when we first separated our public purpose theories from those of Flaherty – an anti-aesthetic movement.



What confuses history is that we had always the good sense to use the aesthetes. We did so because we liked them and because we needed them. It was, paradoxically, with the first-rate aesthetic help of people like Flaherty and Cavalcanti that we mastered the techniques necessary for our quite unaesthetic purposes.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, if NFB films tapped the well of authenticity inherent in the newsreel tradition, they also retained a necessary distance from it through the assimilation of avant-garde impulses pioneered by Cavalcanti, Ruttmann, and especially by Soviet cinema, as we will see later in this chapter.

What seemed like a utilitarian approach in NFB filmmaking was largely moderated by collective and individual contributions made by the artistic talent that worked within the NFB. In this regard NFB films under Grierson's guidance did not entirely dismiss, for example, the struggle for "objectivity" associated with documentary filmmaking practices in comparison to the more self-proclaimed illusionary realism of fiction films. As Aitken suggests:

Grierson's naturalist ideology consisted of a belief that the world, as it was perceived through the human sensory apparatus or through the camera lens, must constitute the basis of aesthetic representation, because it (the perceived world) was the empirical manifestation of underlying determining forces. Because of this, the film-maker, though at liberty to restructure actuality footage to some extent, must retain a commitment to naturalist representation.<sup>9</sup>

Most NFB films during the war reflected interest in depicting genuine settings of working people in Canada: their communities, their workplaces, their union halls, their houses, the products of their labour etc. Nevertheless, these films, both those that were compiled out of existing film footage from Canada and around the world and those produced and shot by NFB talent, seemed consistently bent on using the immediacy of cinematic representation as a basis for symbolic allusion to broader and more abstract social, political and ideological concerns. To this effect, the cinematic camera as well as montage editing approaches were utilized by NFB filmmakers as interventionist rudiments into "raw realities," providing in the process additional modules to their stories: the hidden reality of people's lives that, as in the case of looking at a subject under a microscope – or for that matter through a telescope – allows us to discover elements that we would not have been able to see without the intrusion of a supporting mechanical apparatus.

Film as used in NFB documentaries clearly sought to fill a major gap in how working people saw themselves and each other, and how the rest of society saw them. One can argue that the impact of many of these films was hampered by their heavy-handed editorial voice-overs – partly forced by the war-related urgency of mobilizing people into supporting the Allied campaign in Europe. Progressive filmmakers around the world at the time indeed correctly acknowledged that the voice-over, also used by the NFB, inadvertently contributed to disenfranchising the voices of marginalized social segments of society, including workers and farmers. This does not change the fact that these documentaries endeavoured to provide what they perceived to be a more realistic depiction of workers: this time not as inferior social and economic outcasts (a portrayal which variously continues to dominate even today's cinematic depiction of working-class subjects), but rather as key forces at the core of the country's economic engine.

The significance of the role played by filmmakers such as Legg, Hawes, March, Ivens, Glover, and the Cherrys, among numerous others (in addition to immense contributions made by hundreds of other artists, technicians, and administrators) were of major significance to the creation of this singular body of film work during the war. In this regard, Grierson's model of the compilation film represented an additional element which enhanced both collective and individual initiatives as part of NFB filmmaking practices.

## THE COMPILATION FILM MODEL

On the one hand, Grierson's relationship with fellow filmmakers has been frequently described as authoritarian and quite lacking in allowing for mutual creative input. After all, Grierson's near-full control over the NFB transformed it into a "tightly regulated regime, based upon the mass production of standardized, formulaic propaganda films."<sup>10</sup> In the words of Louis Applebaum, one of NFB's young musician recruits, "the object of film-making at the NFB was to make films which contained 'realistic war-time propaganda messages' with 'no room for improvisation.'"<sup>11</sup> Irrespective of exaggeration or of their validity, such claims at least indicate the amount of influence that Grierson mustered within the NFB, and the level to which the films' stylistic (let alone the political) approach has had his signature on it. On the other hand, the compilation film model which was extensively utilized by the NFB during this period indicates the basis formation of a more collective approach to documentary filmmaking.

The compilation model drew on practices that were occasionally used by the British documentary film movement in the 1930s. This technique, along with dynamic editing and editorial voice-over, became typical of many films produced by the Board at the time. The NFB's utilization of this model involved incorporating film footage from various sources. Dozens of films from the series *World in Action*, for example, regularly integrated Allied and Axis footage into their forms, sometimes with virtually no NFB live-action footage. In other cases NFB films assembled old film footage with newly shot material while in others older footage was usually taken from the Board's own films.

Jane March's *Women Are Warriors* (1942) represents an excellent example of the creative application of the compilation model in NFB films. The film brings together huge pre-edited chunks of British and Soviet footage with practically no NFB-produced material. March's editing approach and her ability to incorporate a multitude of distinct newsreel footage was instinctual with a powerful artistic and political force. The film interweaves a dynamic depiction of the relationship between the fight for women's equality, and for a new more equitable society, with the struggle against fascism. Robust images of Soviet women at work and on the battle front are constructed with superior fluidity of dramatic movement to show how women in the Soviet Union became world pioneers in achieving "work equally with men" within all "social and economic sectors including as petroleum engineers and as farmers." Still, March was able to achieve this despite being undercut by the studio-dictated narration, particularly when it came to preventing her from adding even more enthusiastically feminist live-action Soviet stock cinematography.

Another major example of the successful incorporation of the compilation model is seen in the 1942 film *Inside Fighting Russia* (also titled *Our Russian Ally*). Director Stuart Legg and scriptwriter James Beveridge bring together extensive footage from Soviet newsreel as well as Canadian and other world film-footage to describe the Soviet resistance to the Nazi invasion and the worldwide solidarity with Russia. Heroic images of Soviet soldiers are juxtaposed with images of workers from Britain and Canada demonstrating their support on the streets of London and Montreal. The film also brings together chunks of fast-paced edited Soviet footage of workers at their factories, farmers in their fields, educators and students in their schools, doctors in their hospitals, all symbolizing the country's utilization of its cooperative energy to fight fascism. The editing style of these images clearly reminds us of the dynamic use of montage in earlier Soviet cinema.

Grierson's application of the compilation model only became a dominant practice after he became the head of the NFB. A significant aspect of the compilation model

as far as this study is concerned, is how Grierson rationalized its use as a format that complemented his collective approach to film training and filmmaking:

Grierson combined this approach [compilation film] to film-making with a labour model based on threshold specialization. Inexperienced apprentices would be trained to master aspects of film-making to a satisfactory level, then moved on to the other areas. Although the film-makers became familiar with different areas of film-making, none developed specialist skills or expertise.<sup>12</sup>

Several filmmakers from inside and outside the NFB such as Basil Wright, James Beveridge, Paul Rotha, and Stuart Legg “took a dim view” of that model and considered it “unsuitable model for the future development of documentary.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, we should not underestimate the level to which such practice allowed for the major development of Canadian filmmaking skills. In this regard, the NFB no doubt became an excellent workplace for those interested in pursuing the creative application of new editing techniques and utility.

Here we should underscore that Eisenstein’s and Soviet experimentations with montage were only just being discovered and applied in the west, that is, despite full earlier familiarity with those techniques by people like Grierson, Legg and many others. This means that the NFB’s employment of the compilation model has probably had a major stylistic impact on the work of many filmmaking apprentices at the Board. Similarly, this practice also probably enhanced the Board’s and the films’ own emphasis on encouraging collective debates and generating ideas through discussion and exchange. On another level, we should not underestimate the extent to which this model also facilitated an efficient and less expensive system of film production within the NFB.

## **FINDING THE DRAMA IN THE NEWSREEL**

NFB films mostly appeared preoccupied with presenting a new way of looking at events and peoples. They sought to disentangle “reality” and discover the dialectics that were at work within it and behind it. With this goal in mind they echoed Grierson’s accent on finding the drama that can be excavated out of the camera’s ability to observe the world: “in the actual world of our observation there [is] always a dramatic form to be found.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, what was to make a documentary film different, and what was to help

it move beyond its prescribed observational or neutral function, was to be found in the organization of the observed material around what Grierson identified as “treatment,” a term he used as a synonym with dramatization: “‘Treatment’ or dramatization (also sometimes referenced as ‘interpretation’) reflects the documentarist’s desire and willingness to use actuality material to create a dramatic narrative.”<sup>15</sup>

As early as his mid-1920s articles on modern art, Grierson began to sketch his views about reproducing the real. He argued that paintings did not reproduce the real, but articulated it, through a manipulation of the intrinsic properties of the medium in order to convey an illusory impression of mimesis:

Visual storytelling... involves a manipulation of character and acting and stage as in legitimate drama, it involves a manipulation of visual composition as in painting... it involves a manipulation of tempo as in music... it involves visual suggestion and visual metaphor as in poetry. Beyond all that it involves a manipulation of such effects as are peculiar to itself. This includes (under camera) the manipulation of dissolves, double exposures, trick shots etc.; (under continuity) the manipulation of long shots, close ups, medium shots, truck shots and so on, and of recurring visual themes as in music.<sup>16</sup>

The dramatic, as conceived by Grierson, was a fundamental characteristic of reality, which itself advanced constantly in “a world on the move, a world going places, within an endless process of growth and decay which revealed the ‘dramatic nature of the actual.’”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it was through the patterns of drama that documentary film was to be able to represent “the dramatic processes which generated change and development within society.”<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to how the cinema-direct movement (which became an important feature in Quebec NFB productions of the late 1950s) sought to advance a socially committed cinema through reliance on film’s own neutral ability to reflect its subject, NFB war films appeared at ease with their use of editorial and narrative dramatization interventions as a means of advancing their political views. Equally as important they seemed more appreciative of how the clarity of political vision gave cinematic form an anchor that allowed it to assume specific social and political relevancy.

On one level, a critical aspect of the NFB’s attempt to deal with the social and political realities of the day can be found in the dramatized tropes of live-action re-enactments in numerous films. Good examples are found in the talking head monologues appearing in *Churchill’s Island*, the discussions and the narrative involving

issues of unemployment in *Youth is Tomorrow* and *Charlie Gordon*, the dramatized building of a home by the collective effort of group workers in *Building a House*.

Robert Edmonds' *Coal Face, Canada* (1943) is an important example of how several NFB films of the period ventured towards feature-film narrative construction, *mise-en-scene*, characterization, and synchronized recorded dialogue – all standard attributes of the fiction film. The film presents a dramatized story of a young worker returning from the war. The worker is disappointed by the economic and social stagnation of his hometown. After he takes a room with a miner who used to know his father and who recalls the tragedy of his death in the mines, the two men begin to discuss the important role played by workers, particularly miners, and their unions on the home front. The young man eventually joins up to work in the town's mine. The film's re-enactment of events and its attention to composing an authentic-looking working-class setting presented a genuine attempt in revamping closed expectations of documentary films. As such, this along with many other NFB war films provided new dramatized tropes to documentary filmmaking practices.

As Jack Ellis suggests, despite the fact “the semi-documentary represented a reaction against Grierson's first principles, it nonetheless stemmed from the movement he had founded and the people he had trained.” Films such as *Coal Face, Canada*, along with *Charlie Gordon*, *Youth is Tomorrow* and others gave a glimpse of what would carry over into the post-war era and beyond. Such films would earn a much wider audience than the more sombre documentaries linked with compilation as well as with live-action NFB films of the time. In the meantime, “though he may have resisted the impulse during the war years on grounds of too much aestheticism and artistic self-indulgence, [Grierson] would be closely associated with the semi-documentary form and even the fiction film in post-war Britain.”<sup>19</sup>

On another level, the creative use of the newsreel by NFB filmmakers reached its peak in the context of their attempt to reconstruct stories that gave specific political perspective of and background to major contemporary events. To this effect, compilation films of the period played a major role as harbinger of a new collective memory. Stuart Legg's *The Gates of Italy* (1943), for example, traces the history of fascism in Italy and follows the trails of Mussolini's manipulation of the Italian working class and the “impoverishment of the Italian people,” and his demagogic rhetoric which eventually led many Italians to support fascism. Legg explores the topic formally through splicing newsreel footage of official events, speeches, demonstrations, political discussions and rallies, together with symbolic shots of “Il Duce,” monuments, statues, and museums, editing them carefully to provide the viewer with a chronologically linear narrative about the rise of fascism in Italy. Hundreds of metres of standard newsreel film footage,

apparently from multiple sources and vaults, are reconstructed into a cohesive and informative narrative about class, political populism, and resistance.

Direct Cinema's stipulation of transparency and non-control as a paradigm of authenticity was later challenged as futile and disingenuous. If anything, as Euvrard and Véronneau suggest, *cinéma direct* inadvertently allowed some filmmakers to hide their politics and eventually brought more ideological confusion to the messages they sought to bring forward; they confused "the means with the end... by turning the direct into an ideology itself."<sup>20</sup> Seth Feldman raises a similar concern in his appraisal of the 1970s NFB's program *Challenge for Change*.<sup>21</sup> He cautions against relying on alternative techniques (i.e. direct cinema) to forward social and political messages, and questions the legitimacy of the program's celebrated emphasis on giving direct voice to those who are incapable of articulating their own concerns. He argues that thinking along those lines by way of discussing issues of interest to Canadians of working-class backgrounds is based on erroneous assumptions and could lead to wrong conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

In hindsight, NFB films diametrically contrasted assertions raised later by the *cinéma vérité* proponents who claimed that film could attain an unmediated representation of the real.<sup>23</sup> In some ways these films were more capable than their *vérité* counterparts of acknowledging the contradictory dynamics inherent in the use of any formal strategy. As such NFB filmmakers seemed more in tune with understanding the limitations embedded within the medium itself, and in that context they appeared more reflective on how audiences, political and social moments, and grassroots organizational skills and connections provided major input into how films functioned. In the case of the NFB's Discussion Films, for example, using an observant camera that simply recorded workers as they discussed issues of relevance to them was not sufficient on its own. What made a difference was how these films assumed their organic function in the context of the highly politicized climate within which activists from the left and the labour movement were key and effective contributors. In other words, the ability of the NFB's cinematic practice to acquire a counter-hegemonic bearing on the worker/subject and its audiences in general had to do with the presence of a programmatically clear, broadly based, and well organized and led counter-hegemonic movement. The situation in the late 1950s and even in the 1960s, when *cinéma vérité* emerged, was clearly different, at least in connection to the less cohesive and organized and more spontaneous nature of the radical movements of the time.

## OTHER PARALLELS AND CONNECTIONS

This section will deal with various other parallels and connections that emerged within the same general timeframe as the NFB. Those include Soviet and American influences, as well as parallels with some progressive film practices in Europe.

In his evaluation of Soviet cinema, Grierson found an artistic force capable of “reading into all fields of inquiry and imagination.” He appreciated the dramatic fluidity of its movement, the strength of its approach, and the social emphasis of its themes.<sup>24</sup> Grierson’s interest in the work of early Soviet filmmakers was among the formative elements of his interest in cinema. The 1929 film *Drifters*, the film 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>25</sup> Later in United States, in the mid-1930s, Grierson took on the responsibility of setting up the titles for *Potemkin*, which enabled him to come to know the film “foot by foot and cut by cut.”<sup>26</sup> Grierson concluded that the film’s use of intrinsically cinematic techniques was able to advance “knowledge of tempo, montage, and composition in the cinema.”<sup>27</sup> He also stressed that *Potemkin* impressed him with the amount of naturalistic representation that involved research into press and documentary records of events, shooting the entire film on location, and the use of non-professional actors.<sup>28</sup> All these elements would later constitute the hallmark of Grierson’s as well as the NFB’s documentary stylistic approach.

Another figure in the early years of the NFB was Joris Ivens. Ivens was hired to make one film at the NFB, but was already well-established internationally. The role played by this filmmaker within the Board reflected his international stature. Ivens’s account of his own work as a filmmaker subscribes to the fusion of cinematic practice with political and social activism. This, he argued, only occurred in the context of revolutionizing 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.<sup>29</sup>

The one Soviet filmmaker who did not seem to stylistically hit a chord with earlier British documentary movement filmmakers was Dziga Vertov. In spite of its critical



influence among intellectuals and within progressive circles, the work of the man behind *Man with a Movie Camera* was largely marginalized by the documentary film movement in the west.<sup>30</sup> In the words Paul Rotha, one of the “Griersonians” of the British documentary movement: “Vertov we regarded really as rather a joke you know. All this cutting, and one camera photographing another camera photographing another camera – it was all trickery, and we didn’t take it serious, quite frankly.”<sup>31</sup> In his review of *Man with a Movie Camera* Grierson wrote: “Vertov has pushed the argument to a point at which it becomes ridiculous.” In a review of another Vertov film, *Enthusiasm* (1930) he argued that the film was botched “because he was like any bourgeois highbrow, too clever by half.”<sup>32</sup> The reflexive approach emphasized by Vertov was clearly considered a distraction from the main goals associated with Griersonian documentary filmmaking, which emphasized clarity in communicating messages to the audience. Stylistically, Vertov’s approach seemed to contrast, at least on the surface, with the unobtrusively editorialized and structurally linear and “cohesive” Griersonian documentary.

Years later, the NFB’s approach to the role of film echoed in many ways the theoretical premises by Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, including Dziga Vertov’s approximation of the interventionist role of the movie camera in revealing the reality behind reality. As Grierson himself would suggest, the emphasis on the “creative treatment” of reality essentially functions by way of blunting the charge of propaganda.<sup>33</sup>

While NFB films never shared in practice Vertov’s interest in exploring the camera’s full cinematic potential, they did nevertheless appear to be in sync (at least philosophically) with his fascination with the camera’s superior sensory capacity to that of the human eye. In hindsight, NFB films of the period inadvertently complemented Vertov’s programmatic objective in utilizing the cinematic eye (or the Kino-eye as he called it) to help people see the world in a different manner than they were used to.

As they discussed the critical role of workers in fighting the war against fascism and building a more equitable society after the war, NFB filmmakers incorporated similar stylistic techniques to those used in earlier Soviet films. Their films depicted countless images of spinning industrial machinery operated by men and women workers and farmers in a way that went beyond any claim of “objective” realism.

NFB films such as *Salt from the Earth* (1944) and *Coal for Canada* (1944) used visual techniques that were utilized earlier in the British documentaries of the 1930s, only this time those techniques were reintroduced with a higher level of urgency and stronger vigour. Streams of fast-paced film clips depicting workers in factories, shipyards, mines, and prairie farms were used to show that working on the home front is no less intense, spirited or vital than fighting fascism on the battle fronts of Europe.

The dynamics of Soviet montage made a major impact on filmmaking all over the world. For their part, NFB films captured elements of Soviet editing style that also adhered to its general ideological parameters, particularly in relation to its emphasis on workers and its epic depiction of political and social dynamics in general. Between 1939 and 1946 the NFB developed two major film series. The first series was *Canada Carries On*, which included sixty-two films that were primarily concerned with Canada's role in the war, and the second was the *The World in Action* series that included thirty films dealing with current international events. Stanley Hawes was in charge of *Canada Carries On* and Stuart Legg produced *The World in Action*. Grierson in particular pressed his own stylistic and political outlooks for the two series: "This isn't a documentary war, it's a newsreel war," Grierson declared.<sup>34</sup> Keeping pace with the daily events and developments on the war front, as well as with the changes impacting the role of workers and working-class unions in Canada, major changes affected even the roles traditionally played by various film artists. Jim Ellis describes the nature and scope of these changes:

[I]t was necessary to use more and more newsreel footage shot by anonymous cameramen scattered around the globe; less and less of the material could be specially shot. The director, or director-cameraman, hitherto dominant in documentary, gave way to the writer and editor as controlling figures. In addition to the work of the Canadian combat cameraman, footage was drawn from Britain and the other Commonwealth countries, from the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The style was hard-hitting, the diverse images briskly edited to a preconceived commentary.<sup>35</sup>

What we alluded to earlier as the compilation film practice dominated the NFB's work during this period and involved the use of old footage in conjunction with newly shot material, allowing the production of larger number of films to be made more quickly and inexpensively. A huge number of films were made this way and were eventually used under numerous titles. The selection of, and editing strategies for, the archival materials also impacted the filmic discourse both in concert and in tension with the voice-over commentary. Most of the corpus of films produced during this period was the fruit of the NFB's interactive use of both live-action and compilation film practices. For its part, the use of Soviet montage theory and techniques contributed to the Board's effective and complex utility of both components of its film corpus outcome.

The question of Soviet montage influence on the NFB film practice, however, needs to be qualified. It is imperative to point out that the NFB itself consistently

acknowledged indebtedness to the American *March of Time* series (where Legg himself did an internship). In general, the stylistic approach that was developing within the NFB paralleled a contemporaneous documentary development in the United States, where Popular Front policies were equally influential on much of the documentary activity during the war, though with cultural specificity that transcended film into other areas of cultural practices. Stylistic and political parallels between NFB and American films from the same period can be easily drawn, such as in the case of *Heart of Spain* (1937) by Herbert Kline and Charles Korvin, which featured Canadian communist Dr. Norman Bethune as he worked in Spain in support of the republicans. Another example is the American film *Our Russian Front* (1942), which was directed by none other than Joris Ivens, and produced by the Russian War Relief Inc. (an American Popular Front social and cultural organization). Similar to its Canadian counterpart *Inside Fighting Russia*, the film mainly utilizes footage taken from Soviet battlefield cameramen.

Since the 1930s, progressive cultural circles in the United States, as expressed in the aesthetic manifestos of groups associated with the Popular Front, demonstrated time and again an interest in what they called a revolutionary symbolism. This included a media-encompassing interest in documentary journalism:

By focusing on the voracious appetite for documentary journalism, particularly the documentary book, that hybrid of photographs and text epitomized by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, [William] Scott persuasively documented the documentary impulse as it infiltrated radio news, film newsreels, novels, sociology, reportage, and even the American Guide books of the Federal Writers' project.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, this kind of documentary journalism was also conscious of the need to involve the document itself in a process of transformation into a broader project, rather than sanctifying and celebrating a presumed aura of authenticity and/or objectivity. In this regard, American filmmakers from the Popular Front tradition were unabashed in their emphasis on using the document (in our case, film footage, clips, voice-over) in a larger and politically coherent project. In the words of American filmmaker Leo Hurwitz, "Tiny documents in the form of shots and sounds bore the same relation to the film as the small pieces of coloured stone and glass to the mosaic mural, the brush-strokes to the painting, the individual words and phrases to the novel. The stuff was document, but the construction was invented, time-collage."<sup>37</sup> In essence, many American artists of the Popular Front provided the basis for a fusion between modernist tendencies with "a recognition of the social and political crisis," as Michael

Denning affirms. He goes on to argue that one might even “accurately call the work of the cultural [popular] front a ‘social modernism,’ a third wave of the modernist movement.”<sup>38</sup>

On another level, there is no doubt that films both from the *Canada Carries On* and *The World in Action* series, with their emphasis on edited stock footage and dramatization of war events and labour issues, were in most ways closely modeled on the American series *March of Time*. But as Edgar Anstey suggests, Legg’s technical approach in producing *The World in Action*, for example, was conducted with much more literary grace than its American counterpart: “maximum commentary impact [of the films] depended on a very precise relationship between picture and, not word, but sometimes even syllable.”<sup>39</sup> The same thing can be argued in connection with the *Canada Carries On* series.

Soon, both NFB series were competing with, and in most cases surpassing, the American *March of Times* not only in Canada (where *World in Action*, for example, was being shown in some eight hundred theatres) but also in the world market. Eventually the series “reached a combined United States-Canadian monthly audience of 30 to 40 million.”<sup>40</sup> Commenting on the film *Food – Weapon of Conquest* (1942), *Time* magazine in June 15, 1942 enthusiastically said: “This cinematic editorial is almost a blueprint of how to make an involved, dull, major aspect of World War II understandable and acceptable to moviegoers.”

When it comes to its European connections, the NFB’s emphasis on a self-described edited or a dramatized version for depicting the realities and views of working-class Canadians paralleled in certain ways aspects of 1930s French cinema. Of particular importance were the films that came to prominence during the period of the Popular Front, when a left-wing alliance of socialists, communists and the centre-left won the 1936 elections and a government under socialist Leon Blum took office for a brief period. Among the most famous examples from that period is Jean Renoir’s feature documentary (partially acted) *La Vie est à nous* (1936), produced by the communist-backed collective Ciné-Liberté. Other films were made by members of a group calling itself L’Equipe. The group was attached to the Socialist Party, and directed by Francois Moch, brother of Jules Moch (Prime Minister Leon Blum’s assistant) and by Marceau Pivert, a prominent left-wing socialist.<sup>41</sup> Some NFB filmmakers even saw elements in left-wing French fiction filmmaking that were of particular interest to their attempts to present a dramatized depiction of reality. Discussing how he and other filmmakers were impressed by the techniques used by Rene Clair in his film *A Nous la Liberté* (1931), Stanley Hawes, the man who was in charge of the NFB’s *Canada Carries On* series, praised the use of sound in the film: “You don’t realise, until you see a film

like this, how stereotyped and dull the majority of films have become. Our critical faculties have become deadened by the regular diet of uninspired productions made to formula.<sup>42</sup> This by no means indicates direct influence by certain French work on the NFB's films at the time, but rather the presence of some parallel interests between the two filmmaking practices.

While NFB films concentrated on the war effort, the role of workers within it, and on the image of the worker as a consensus builder, the French films seemed more preoccupied with the heated social and political struggles and debates that were taking place in France and Europe in the 1930s; they mainly featured political strikes and demonstrations as well as events taking place in connection with the Spanish Civil War. In both cases, however, the philosophy behind using film as a social commentator was similar in its broad parameters; they both saw and used film as a medium that intervened in the process of depicting reality. Whether within the framework of its "dialectical" outlook (this term was used by self-described Marxist French filmmakers), or within the context of dramatized interpretation of "reality" (as Grierson preferred to label his own version of cinematic "intervention"), both Popular Front filmmakers in France and NFB filmmakers in Canada sought to expose the drama of social and political veracity and the epic role played by the working class within it. As such, both groups were clearly influenced by the Marxist critique of formalism, and by theories of critical social realism (before Stalin's inscription of his own version of "Socialist Realism"). These theories argued that, besides the truth of detail, it was important to represent typical characters under typical circumstances, in order to give as full an account as possible of individual and social relationships. This was close to Grierson's model of an epic-naturalist cinema, which sought to explore interactivity between social and individual forces.

Earlier still, Grierson's stylistic vision that enhanced his interest in documentary film practice was 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>43</sup>

But Grierson's and the NFB films' stylistic philosophy of interfering in the depiction of reality was even more deeply informed by Soviet cinema of the two first decades of the twentieth century.

While NFB films did not subscribe to the rhetoric of the more explicitly political and class-partisan work of Soviet cinema, or to some extent French documentaries during the Popular Front period, they nevertheless fully appreciated and sought to use cinema as a political medium. As such they consciously avoided tendencies towards formalist self-indulgence, while their unambiguous goal revolved around reaching out to the public, to inform it, and to mobilize it for battles that were seen as crucial to humanity's future. There is therefore a considerable continuity and consistency in how the stylistic motto of the NFB during the World War II period, with Grierson at the helm, gravitated around bringing the "affairs of our time" to screen "in a fashion which strikes the imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was."<sup>44</sup>

In the words of Stanley Hawes:

Grierson was a communications man with a social conscience and he believed that painters, poets, writers and musicians should use their skills in the service of the community and project social problems into the national consciousness... (documentary) is film in the service of humanity.<sup>45</sup>

As a result, NFB films were indeed effectively utilized to reach out to broad audiences where they sought to instigate discussions about matters that meant a lot to the country and to its working class. In the end these films were able to present accessible ideas with accessible film forms that were politically challenging to the status quo, ones that were also ideologically forceful, particularly in their depiction of the working-class subject.