

## 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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The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the silhouettes of two workers on a suspended platform, likely a scissor lift, positioned against a large window with a prominent grid pattern. The worker on the left is holding a large, dark, triangular object. The worker on the right is standing on the platform. The scene is backlit, creating a high-contrast silhouette effect.

Malek Khouri

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Cinemas Off Centre Series

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# CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments	VII
Introduction	1
1 Social Class and the NFB's Early Films in Canadian Film Studies	21
2 Canadian Film Culture Before the NFB	41
3 The Development of a Working-Class Counter-Hegemonic Movement: A Historical Survey	53
4 The Establishment of the NFB: A Political and Institutional Overview	83
5 Out of the Depression and Into the War: NFB Films Between 1939 and 1941	105
6 Workers and the Politics of Fighting Fascism: NFB Films Between 1942 and 1945	119
7 Workers, Democracy and Social Welfare in NFB Films Between 1942 and 1945	143
8 Stylistic Trends within the Discourse of NFB War Films	173
9 The NFB in a Moment of Transition: Workers in NFB Films Between 1945 and 1946	193
Appendix: Annotated Filmography	225
Bibliography	239
Notes	251
Index	269





## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first rendezvous with Canadian cinema was in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a young immigrant arriving in Canada from war-torn Lebanon. I remember taking two courses on Canadian film at York University, both of which gave me the impression that this cinema only began to materialize sometime in the 1970s with the making of films like *Goin' Down the Road*, *Paperback Hero*, and *Mon Uncle Antoine*, along with several others. Of course, there were occasional references to a John Grierson and an NFB (National Film Board of Canada), but I do not recall any substantive talk on a serious Canadian cinema that existed before the making of these celebrated films.

As a young film enthusiast in Sidon, a coastline city on the eastern Mediterranean, I had the privilege of sampling all kinds of films, including some shown in local cultural clubs and libraries. This allowed me to view and appreciate documentary films at a relatively young age. Frequently, this also gave me the opportunity to linger after the screenings to listen to some very heated discussions about the films and their social and political significance.

Within a setting engulfed in political strife and a Middle East in constant turmoil, to be directly engaged in politics was part of life, even for a well-pampered middle-class kid like myself. As a result, appreciating how politics unswervingly impacted culture and how culture impacted politics came to me as part of a natural learning process and experience. This politically charged background, however, put me in an awkward position once I began to study film in a Canadian university setting.

One day during a conversation with one of my film professors, James Beveridge – about whose filmmaking background I then knew nothing – I kept ranting about how students in the class had no comprehension of how film interacted with politics, or something to this effect. Beveridge of course alerted me against such quick pronouncements. More importantly, he revealed something that made me very

curious. First, he mentioned something about himself being previously involved in making films with the NFB during World War II. Then, he uttered the magic words (for me, at least, coming from a left-wing family background): *Working Class*. I was dumbfounded: did this term even exist in Canada? To my added surprise, he went on to say that making films about the working class, its role in society and in the war was at the front and centre of what the NFB did during that period of its history. Years passed since this conversation but I continued to wonder why no one talked seriously about that era and its films in the same way and with the same passion that Beveridge did. Was it the artistic insignificance of the films, as some suggested? Was it due to their propagandistic and even condescending tone towards their presumed working-class audience, as Peter Morris and Joyce Nelson's (and, to a lesser extent, Brian Winston's) critiques of Grierson claimed, or was it actually because of the politics belied by that unspoken term, *working class* and everything that surrounded it?

The marginalizing of early NFB films in general and the underestimation of their significance to studying social class in particular always raised my curiosity. However, what kept troubling me throughout my later years of studying film was that dignified but subtly bitter tone with which Beveridge expressed his indignation with the fact that the full story about these films was still waiting to be told. Since then, my interest in what cinema signified socially and politically was enhanced with new interest in exploring how cinema impinged on and reflected specific moments in history, particularly those associated with periods of heightened political tension.

This book is driven by the goal of contributing to a rather large and ongoing task – namely the study of the depiction of the working class in Canadian cinema. Workers have been central to this cinema's history, yet the desire among much of the scholarship on Canadian cinema to define a nationalist agenda has concealed some remarkable facets of the way Canadian films portray people from working-class backgrounds. In many ways, this book is a tribute to James Beveridge along with hundreds of other NFB workers and filmmakers, whose exertion during the war offered Canadians a unique perspective on class politics.

My early version of this book came out of a Ph.D. dissertation in the Communications Studies Program of McGill University in Montreal. My appreciation goes to Professors George Szanto and Will Straw for their dedicated support and encouragement, to fellow students for their contributions and insights into the material. In my own Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary, I want to thank my colleague and Dean Kathleen Scherf, who for five years now has encouraged my scholarship and been a good friend and tutor. Also thanks to many other colleagues at University of Calgary who are too numerous to mention. A

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Barbara Rockburn has been a dear friend. She helped me write better by patiently revising my prose. My gratitude also goes to Peter Enman, editor, Scott Anderson, copy editor, and John King, senior editor at the University of Calgary Press for their diligent work on the manuscript.

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And a very special thanks to my mother Huneineh and my father Mounir, who, as my first friends and mentors, have so lovingly contributed with their comments, questions, and political commitment to improving my work. I dedicate this book to them.





# INTRODUCTION

Responding to the climates of social and political upheavals that prevailed in Canada and around the world in and around the World War II period, many filmmakers from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) sought new and committed ways to use film as an instrument for social awareness and change. By 1946 these filmmakers produced a major corpus of film which offered a unique outlook on the role of working-class people within Canadian society. This corpus informed and was informed by national and international contexts, and became part of a broader ideological and cultural agenda capable of encompassing wide cross-sections of Canadian society. This book brings to light a wealth of archival material: a range of these films from the initial years of the NFB, films that have either been long forgotten or in fact were never really known. My main objective here is to provide a new reading of these films, by demonstrating the extent to which the Canadian working class was depicted visually for a Canadian film audience during a specific period in Canadian history.

This book avoids detailed assessment of individual films, and favours historicizing and giving an organized view of a broad film corpus. This body of film is assessed in the context of appraising the parameters, and the contextual emergence and descent of the political discourse of the Popular Front and the Communist Party of Canada during the period in which the films were produced. The films are set within a moment that brings them into life: a vast range of interrelated political, cultural and cinematic processes. In this regard, I offer institutional analysis of the NFB during this period; not simply of the politics and personalities who were responsible for the Board's strengths and for its mistakes, but more specifically of the kinds of filmic practices *permitted* to creative artists and administrators who were at the same time independent producers and civil workers functioning under the constraints of wartime society.

I have written this book in the passionate belief that an awareness of intellectual workings of ideological hegemony is indispensable for comprehending not only older

film texts, such as the mostly forgotten and sidelined films that this book deals with, but also for understanding cinematic practices of various moments in the history of cinema. Underestimating the relevance of early NFB films to the ideological twists that fostered the entire development of Canadian cinema, and even worse, dismissing them as merely illustrative of authoritarian government propaganda has been endemic in Canadian film studies. Many standard core courses on Canadian cinema customarily continue to ignore these films to the extent that many students are genuinely convinced (as I was two decades ago) that no Canadian film culture of real value or influence existed before the late 1950s, or worse still, before the 1970s. Furthermore, attempts to tackle the issue of class are themselves marred by a similar ignorance of the early NFB films' unique bearing on Canadian cinema's approximation of this issue.

The seven years following the creation of the NFB in 1939 was a seminal phase in the history of Canadian cinema's depiction of working-class people. As they pondered social and political issues such as unemployment, economic prosperity, World War II, democracy, and post-war rebuilding, NFB films were part of a larger cultural practice that advocated a working-class counter-hegemonic political discourse. As such, these films signalled a departure from earlier Canadian cinematic discourse prior to the establishment of the NFB. Furthermore, the discourse of these films drew on a specific propensity within the working-class movement at the time, associated with the Communist Party and its Popular Front strategy. When the Cold War took hold of the country by the mid-1940s, however, the NFB abruptly entered a new phase that represented a reversal in how its films approached working-class and labour issues. The change would consequently alter the ideological purport of NFB films for several years to come.

Throughout its history, cinema in Canada has examined aspects of the lives and politics of working-class Canadians. Hundreds of documentary and feature films have focused on defining what it means to be a worker, assessing the role of labour in politics and in society, and evaluating the significance of the labouring process. Numerous films have also told stories about the unemployed, the poor, unions and union activists. In hindsight, Canadian cinema documented and chronicled a wealth of stories about the struggles, victories and defeats of workers and their communities. These films, however, were never ideologically homogenous. On the one hand, some films tended to idealize, patronize and/or even disparage workers. Through the elision and mystification of the notions of production and work, some films often privileged a narrow understanding of workers, their lives and their struggles. Still, a substantial number of films presented an ideologically different take. Among those were the films produced by the NFB between 1939 and 1946.

Films produced by the NFB during World War II stressed the leading role of workers in society. They contemplated the responsibility of workers in fighting fascism, called for the defence of and celebrated the creation of the world's "first working-class state" in Russia, and pondered forging "a new world order" based on ideas of equitable and collective democratic control and utilization of social and economic resources. As rudiments of a unique moment in Canadian history, these films were an extension of a broader counter-hegemonic movement which placed the working class at the centre of its struggle for "political and social change." As such, the films became active elements within a movement that transcended the partisan limitations of left-wing politics and involved intellectuals and cultural workers and broad discursive counter-hegemonic social and political formations.

Despite the critical significance of the body of NFB films between 1939 and 1946, research on Canadian cinema has largely ignored, or at best presented a narrow view of the ideological workings of these films. Particularly missing from the literature on the NFB and its founder John Grierson is the clear impact made by the labour movement and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) on the Board's film discourse during this period. The CPC and its Popular Front policy at the time notably informed how NFB films tackled political issues, and virtually patterned the counter-hegemonic philosophical thrust of these films' discourse.

The influence of the movement around the strategy of the Popular Front, initiated by the CPC in the mid-1930s and supported by substantial sections within the working class, expanded beyond the party and the labour movement; it even informed social and political interests that included but also went beyond those of the working class and the socialist left. Indeed, the strength of this movement largely rested in its ability to offer a political perspective that conceived working-class interests as synonymous with those of the majority of society. The discourse of the NFB films itself became an extension of this socially and politically heterogeneous mass movement.

The NFB's film discourse reflected a consensual approach to understanding and dealing with the social and political preoccupations of the day. It offered a constellated perspective which celebrated "new" ideas and values, such as the creation of public social institutions, regulation of market forces, support for cooperative and centralized social and economic systems and plans, solidifying the role of workers in the management of the workplace and society, emphasizing the central labour input into commodity value creation, a new and revamped role for women in society, and measuring economic output based on its linkage to social needs rather than to capitalist profit. Such ideas were presented as commonsensical propositions that were vital to building a modern society.

My reading of early NFB films, therefore, demonstrates how they constituted a valuable element within the working-class and left culture of the period. Concurrently, this reading also demonstrates how a cultural practice and discourse – the loose affiliation of movements and organizations which, in various forms of alliance or sympathy with the communist movement, transformed the NFB's culture. The book examines a corpus of films and discusses how they articulated a counter-hegemonic perspective as an extension to similar views of those adopted at the time by the Popular Front. Here I give clear consideration of historical context as produced out of a dialectic, rather than a single-sided or static element. In this regard, I only briefly deal with questions about possible direct organizational links between specific NFB filmmakers and workers and the Communist Party of Canada, and deliberately avoid questions of a possible communist "conspiracy" within the NFB. To begin with, this fear-mongering approach has had its proponents for several decades within several disciplines of Canadian history. In any case, I think that traditional exaggeration of the role and weight of individuals in shaping history does not serve the goal of understanding the complexity of any discourse, including the one which informed and was informed by the NFB films in question.

Instead, the book chooses to explore historical context and how it broadly impacts, extends and limits film practice. It concentrates on manifestations of counter-hegemonic impulses within the films to demonstrate how they, within the limits of the era and of the institution, articulated the working class as active agents of history. In other words, the book brings the institution and the series of film products together, explaining both why certain subject matter and certain narratives become possible, and – just as important – why others in fact remain absent.

Before I go any further, however, it is imperative to clarify this book's utilization of the term *working class*. Given the ground-shifting events that impacted working-class politics after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, and considering the expansion of the role of technology in industrial production, which allowed broader and more vigorous multinational capitalist expansions, reference to the term working class certainly needs revisiting.

When it comes to identifying classes, the dominant tendency is to exclude rather than include more people from the working-class category. In most cases the inclination is to delimit this class to blue-collar industrial white males. Consequently, racial and ethnic minorities, women and children are often excluded from this category. White-collar workers, teachers, public servants, the unemployed or the poor are also invariably omitted from the working-class categories. This narrow definition clearly mystifies the notion of class and reinforces misconceptions about social realities in

advanced capitalist societies such as Canada; it also reiterates ideological perceptions of these societies as middle-class economic and social havens to which the notions of class divisions, let alone struggles, does not apply.

My use of the term working class includes those who sell their labour for wages. This definition roughly distinguishes as members of this class those who create in their labour and have taken from them surplus value. It also allows the inclusion of those who have no – or relatively little – control over the nature or the products of their work and those who are not professionals or managers. This definition, though admittedly blurred at the edges, gives us at least a reasonable place from which to start.

Equally as important, my utilization of the term working class also benefits from Gregory Kealey's attempt to move beyond the narrow indications that come with the use of the term *labour* as "a category of political economy, a problem of industrial relations, a canon of saintly working class leaders, a chronicle of union locals or a chronology of militant strike actions."<sup>2</sup> My use of the term labour is mainly linked to the labour movement itself, which includes trade unions, workers' organizations and other labour related *institutional* connections. In light of these definitions the parameters of this study become clearer, in that it does not focus on exploring individual or institutional linkages between labour unions and the NFB, but rather maps out a discourse that transcends immediate structural associations and involves broad discursive practices of a working-class counter-hegemonic movement.

Having said that, it is important to point out that the films at hand indeed concentrated on depicting blue-collar industrial workers. Clearly, this corresponded with the numerical strength of this section of workers during this particular period in the development of the Canadian capitalism. The films' focus on industrial workers also reflected the influence of this specific section of the working class in organizing and mobilizing other workers and segments of society. This influence extended to the movements of the unemployed, agricultural workers and farmers, fishing industry workers, as well as intellectuals and groups who supported the policies of left-wing labour organizations, the Popular Front and the Communist Party. For its part, a significant number of NFB films depicted workers in the rural and the fisheries economic sectors. In most cases workers in those areas variously shared organizational and political links with industrial workers. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the context and political preferences of each of the blue-collar worker sectors mentioned above differ, even if there is overlap in progressive goals. The intention in this book is to stress how the counter-hegemonic sentiment of the films from around the World War II period carried weight in connection with commonalities in the outlooks and concerns of various sections of the Canadian working class.

In relation to other terminology and scope, it is important to stress that this book uses the terms *left wing* and *communist* almost interchangeably. There were two influential political currents within the Canadian labour and working-class movement in the period that this study deals with: one dominated by the social democratic Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which was created in 1935, and the other by the Communist Party of Canada, which was officially launched thirteen years earlier in 1922 (the party was known between 1943 and 1959 as the Labour Progressive Party). After the establishment of the CCF in 1935, the trade union movement became increasingly divided between supporters from one or the other of these two political tendencies. Of course labour unions included many who were partisans of neither organization. Certainly within the communist faction there were a large number of unionists who were non-party members. The communist-supported group of unions was generally referred to as the left wing of the labour movement. Still, it is imperative to point out that much of the emphasis on ideological differences between the Communist Party of Canada and the CCF during World War II was largely influenced by Cold-War-inflected rewritings of the period's history. This includes much of the material that deals with the ideological and political nuances that separated the CCF and the CPC. As left and labour Canadian historian Ian McKay proposes in his paradigm-shifting article on the issue, there remains a tendency to deny, or at least to underestimate, the similarities in the policies of the two parties during the pre-Cold War period.

McKay suggests that the shift towards a Popular Front policy by the post-1935 Communist Party in many ways resulted in the emergence of a "third period" wave in Canadian socialism, "in which nationalism, the management of the economy, and the restoration of harmony to the international order were seen as paramount."<sup>3</sup> This, McKay suggests, eventually resulted in a "certain convergence within a common formation" between the CCF and the Communists on the question of the socialist state.<sup>4</sup> Aside from sectarian and political differences around issues such as the need for a vanguard revolutionary party as advocated by the Communist Party, and the emphasis on a mass party and coalition as promoted by the CCF, as well as latter party's adherence to "parliamentary Marxism,"<sup>5</sup> both parties shared a common vision of a country "in which capitalist ownership has been replaced by social ownership, and 'the rapacious system of monopoly capitalism' replaced by a 'democratic socialist society.'"<sup>6</sup> The CCF-produced book *Make This Your Canada* essentially celebrated "a specific kind of socialist state: one in which democracy is supplemented by comprehensive and systematic state planning, similar to (at least in general terms) the type of planning seen in both the Soviet Union and wartime Canada."<sup>7</sup> Even on the issue of solidarity with the Soviet state itself, the CCF was far from being anti-Soviet as it later became at the height

of the Cold War. In fact the party adopted a similar view to that of the Communist Party, in which it conceived of the Soviet Union as an example of a country where the population was able to embark “upon a colossal plan of organized social revolution,’ which has already given them ‘a powerful new system capable of withstanding the onslaught of the world’s mightiest armies.’”<sup>8</sup> Overall, the CCF shared at this moment in history almost all the programmatic elements that were proclaimed by the CPC in 1935 in the context of its adoption of Popular Front strategy. Another important element to stress when it comes to influences from other groups which inadvertently enhanced the discourse and influence of the counter-hegemonic movement at the time, is the role played by the cooperative movement in general during this period in Canadian history. For example, the importance of the cooperative spirit – particularly when it comes to Atlantic Canada – was connected to the well-rooted regional priest-led cooperatives and credit unions, which were in many cases decidedly non-communist. In any case, this book concentrates on examining how one of the two major popular left-wing traits within the Canadian working-class movement, the Communist Party, and by extension its Popular Front policies, informed the discourse of NFB films.

An important issue to which this book indirectly alludes is the fact that the NFB during this period paid almost no attention to the cultural and political specificities of working-class concerns and life in Quebec. Both Pierre Veronneau’s three-volume book on the history of Quebec cinema, and Gilles Carle and Werner Nold’s documentary *Cinema Cinema* (1985) discuss the Quebec team at the NFB during its first twenty-five years. What resonates from these two attempts to tackle this epoch of Quebec cinema is that the embryonic francophone contingent within the NFB during World War II seems to have been largely sidelined or marginalized, at least in its ability to independently tackle Quebec’s conditions during this pre-Quiet Revolution period. It is important to note here, however, that recruiting Québécois, who were largely not in sympathy with the war, and “still harboured resentment concerning the conscription laws of World War I,” represented a challenge to Grierson and to the NFB. This situation seems to have trickled down to the Board focusing on making soft-sell programs “to persuade these unenthusiastic people to join the war effort.”<sup>9</sup>

The only group of films with specifically Québécois themes was Norman McLaren’s six film animation series *Chants Populaires*. Five of the six films were produced in 1944 and the last in 1946. The series visualized a group of French Canadian folk songs. Probably the only film of the period to deal with a mainly Quebec-related working-class setting and topic which also involved a filmmaker from Quebec was Jean Palardy’s *Gaspé Cod Fishermen* (1944). The film describes how collective effort “brings together the people of Grande-Rivière on the Gaspé Peninsula to catch, prepare, and sell the cod

upon which they depend for food and income.” Another film with specific significance to depicting life among economically marginalized segments of Quebec was Jane March’s *Alexis Trembley, Habitant* (1943), which presented a picture of peasant life within a traditional Quebec family.

While a distinct Quebec film culture did indeed emerge prior to the years of the Quiet Revolution, the emergence of labour film itself in Quebec is probably best regarded as part of this rebellion against existing cultural and ideological limitations in Quebec, which itself did not occur until almost two decades after the end of World War II. This, nevertheless, remains ironic considering that Montreal was where the first and only official communist Member of Parliament ever to be elected won a seat in the early 1940s in the Cartier area, one of the city’s most well-recognized working-class districts at the time. Further study of this apparently contradictory manifestation of political and cinematic dynamics within Quebec is clearly needed! Suffice to say, the relocation of the NFB headquarters from Ottawa to Montreal in the 1950s later paved the way for a major evolvement in Quebec (and for that matter Canadian) cinematic interest in the working-class subject in the 1960s and 1970s.

In its first editorial in 1977, the Canadian film and cultural journal *Cine-Tracts* contemplated a critical practice capable of unmasking the ideological character of criticism itself. This goal was to be achieved through a specific theoretical connection:

In linking together the issues of self-reflexivity, subjective positioning, and hegemonic social structure, we are proposing the outline of a possible theory of culture which embraces both the “critique of ideology” and the problematic of praxis. This work is largely incomplete and thus far, poses far more questions than answers.<sup>10</sup>

Today, finding this theoretical critical connection remains as crucial as it was more than twenty years ago when it was originally proposed by *Cine-Tracts*.

This book’s employment of a theoretical framework that brings ideological hegemony to the centre of its re-evaluation of NFB’s early films is itself a tribute to the task that *Cine-Tracts* set out to accomplish. The book conceives the depiction of the working-class subject in the NFB’s war films as a cultural practice located in historically determined social praxis. By studying film within historically defined terms, this book also attests to the inherent limitations and possibilities of cinematic practice and points out its interactive influence on hegemonic power relationships.

The discipline of film studies continues to contend with seemingly contradictory critical priorities. While theoretical elaborations over the last three decades provided

new perspectives for studying cinema, the basis for analyzing film remained variably focused on dealing with the filmic text in relative isolation from its setting within history. Furthermore, while disparate approaches have been useful in untangling a variety of filmic social denotations and the ways in which audiences understand and relate to them, that has not prevented the widening of an arbitrary gap between film studies and social sciences. Therefore, looking at cinema as a social process and consequently assessing its significance based on studying the empirical elements in different areas of film practice is still largely posed as antithetical – or at least as a non-converging parallel – to dealing with the filmic text as the main subject of appraisal.

Labour and cultural historian Steven Ross identifies five components that are crucial for addressing the ideological construction of the working class in cinema. These include: the movie industry, movie audience, historically related political dynamics, the manipulation of state power, and labour relations within the movie industry. While he acknowledges that each of these elements develops in its own unique way, Ross also suggests that they overlap with each other at particular points of their evolution, thereby creating “common fields of intersection.” The final film product as seen by audiences becomes an extension of all these elements.<sup>11</sup> Ross’s approach echoes propositions made two decades earlier by British cultural critic Raymond Williams.

Williams acknowledges the need to temporarily isolate precise elements within the general framework of cultural analysis, based on specific research priorities. But he also draws a precept of a sociology of culture that lies in the “complex unity of the elements thus listed or separated.” This unity, Williams contends, epitomizes the task of the sociology of culture as a distinctive task “from the reduced sociology of institutions, formations, and communicative relationships and yet, as a sociology” makes it radically different from the analysis of isolated forms.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding any cultural intellectual climate presupposes an analysis of the underlying ideas or philosophies characterizing a specific milieu, how they are rooted in material practices and how they circulate within the various parts of the superstructure (the term is based on Marx’s allegorical demonstration of the materiality of economic formations as constituents of an infrastructure, and ideology, culture and politics as elements of the superstructure), and how phenomena that might appear unique contain a common ideological nucleus, the substance and function of which may be reciprocally converted or translated from one to the other. As part of historically specific hegemonic relationships, cultural analysis cannot avoid assessing what cultural products most evidently manifest in relation to ideological intelligibilities.

Building on Williams’s approach to studying the cultural text as an extension of wider social and historical interactive elements, this book examines the depictions of

the working-class subject in the films produced by the NFB between 1939 and 1946 as sites for excavating and untangling the dialectics that have shaped the ideological intelligibilities of the period of which they were part. The films are presented as testimonies to the interacting and overlapping dialectics surrounding the struggle around ideological hegemony during this specific era of Canadian history.

The book concerns itself with examining the discourse of this body of films, and as such explores one aspect of a discursive formation associated with the NFB's interaction with the Canadian working-class movement within a specific historical moment. In this regard, Foucault's approach to identifying discourse as opposed to discursive practice is important to reaffirm. For Foucault, discourses are systems of thought or domains of knowledge that form around certain themes or ideologies, for instance, justice. A discursive practice, in this case the juridical system, would involve institutions (courts, etc.) and technologies (laws, means of enforcing them). Together, discourses, institutions, and technologies interact as the discursive formation of the law.<sup>13</sup> In the case of this book, the emphasis is primarily on exploring the discourse of working-class representations in NFB films within a specific period of the Board's history. Therefore, while I do indeed refer to the institutional and personal related aspects that were part of the general discursive formation in question (i.e., the NFB, NFB films, the Communist Party, and the working-class movement during World War II), my incorporation of these elements is restricted to demonstrating and pointing out their impact on the nature of the system of thought itself (i.e. the discourse) and the context within which it operated.

This study is also theoretically grounded in Antonio Gramsci's articulation of the notion of hegemony (and by extension, counter-hegemony) as it functions through the emergence of historical blocs. Gramsci submits that various social and political forces form material bases for specific hegemonies that in turn give prominence to a more or less hierarchical structure of social classes, as well as broadly consensual cultural, political and ethical viewpoints and philosophies. The hegemony of any given social class is maintained only as long it is able to ensure a broad-based cohesive alliance that by the end reflects the material interests of this class. To counteract capitalist hegemony Gramsci underscores the need to develop strategies for building an alternative proletarian hegemony (or counter-hegemony); this can only be achieved through bringing together a new class alliance or historical bloc between the working class and its own political and cultural views and the interests at its core. Attaining such a counter-hegemonic bloc is crucial before any revolutionary transformation of society can be achieved.

Gramsci's theoretical approach is particularly useful in helping us understand the emergence of the NFB's discourse on labour and the working class, and the class character of this discourse in connection with the struggle around political hegemony in Canada prior to, and after World War II. Gramsci's approach represents a turn away from the concept of monolithic, virtually irresistible ideological determination in favour of exploring dialectical relations between the interests of several classes under the hegemony of one of them. In speaking of spontaneous and active consent, Gramsci refers to the subordinate classes' acceptance of the ruling class's world outlook and its moral and cultural values. The ideology of the capitalist class, expressed through its intellectuals and the institutions developed within civil society in the course of a prolonged rise to dominance (e.g., political parties, churches, schools, the press, etc.) has the effect of moulding the consciousness of people and providing them at the same time with rules of practical conduct and moral behaviour.

Therefore, hegemony goes beyond the restrictive parameters of false consciousness or direct control and manipulation of the masses, an assumption that is largely characteristic of how of the critical discourse on Canadian cinema interprets ideology, as I will demonstrate in the first chapter. Rejecting this form of negative interpretation of ideology, Gramsci recognizes it as a "terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc."<sup>14</sup> As such, hegemonic ideology provides a relatively coherent and systematic worldview that does not simply influence, mould, or hail people, but serves as a principle of organization of social institutions.

By stating that "structures and superstructures form a historical bloc," and that "the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructure is the reflection of the social relations of production," Gramsci provides a basis for appreciating how social forces are also capable of setting limits to the operation of cultural practices. He also demonstrates that social and cultural realities do not purely reflect or mirror economic class interests, and that they are not predetermined by dominant economic structures or organization of society. Instead, these realities emerge within arenas of interminable struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Since, in their material practice, social subjectivities operate within the structures they inhabit, they are also potentially capable of negotiating their conditioning and of becoming active and creative agents that grapple to break the bounds of a necessity that in the last analysis is only relative. This is what Gramsci labels the moment of catharsis, which "indicates the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment." This moment designates the passage from "objective to subjective" and from "necessity to freedom,"<sup>16</sup> when "structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive, and is

transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives.”<sup>17</sup> Ideology, as perceived in this book, is therefore a “terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”<sup>18</sup>

This terrain involves different forms and/or levels of social consciousness, all of which contribute to sustaining or challenging specific hegemonies. While ideology particularly engages “modes of feeling, valuing, maintenance and reproduction of social power,”<sup>19</sup> these conditions also allow for varied levels of ideological self-consciousness among the subaltern. A higher level of ideological awareness could lead to the emergence of social agency that has the potential of playing a role in social and political change. As such, ideology transcends expressing or reflecting entrenched and unconscious set of values and influences. In this book, hegemonic dominance in civil society is seen as enhanced by philosophical consensus around values and ideas. Such consensus, however, is itself in a relentless struggle to reaffirm its dominance within society. Values in any given society are always open to different interpretations; they can be expounded to solidify the consent of the subaltern and its concordance with the interests of the dominant class, or they can conversely be construed in a counter-hegemonic fashion to ideologically challenge the outlook of that class.

Both traditional and contemporary modes of ideological analysis within film studies have an inclination to fetishize and/or isolate the analysis of certain signifying systems within the film. This often occurs at the expense of appreciating the importance of film as a historically grounded cultural process. One result of this tendency, at its extreme, is to become preoccupied by the grammar and language of the film (irrespective of how the notion of language is dealt with in the context of the multiple discussions by Metz to Deleuze and their respective followers) to the extent that the historicity of cinema as a crucial element of how it interacts with audience becomes irrelevant to the discussion. Concentrating on the internal workings of the text (or even on a universalized form of cognitive understanding of the text) traditionally steered away from appreciating film as part of continuum and as an embedded element of a wider social matrix. This is at the core of why film studies rarely deals with certain hegemonic moments where there are manifestations of political challenge and ideological resistance. The emphasis on the internal textual working of cinema virtually lessens the interest in, and the ability to formulate better appreciation of, broad bodies of film (outside of genres, filmmakers, nationalisms, ethnicities, gender, etc.) that specifically relate to various historical moments and settings. Subsequently, filmic practices of counter-hegemonic relevance have been largely oblivious to some Canadian film critics.. By choosing to analyze a body of film in the context of the historical moment of their emergence and death, I am hoping to contribute to the task of seeking a more historically conscious

Canadian film studies. Through its interdisciplinary incorporation of film studies with left-wing political and social history, and through its emphasis on the significance of early NFB films as valuable elements of working-class culture beyond the specific and limited terms of evaluation within traditional film studies (where aesthetic concerns are privileged), this book hopes to broaden both the base of written history on the formation of the NFB as well as our understanding of Popular Front initiatives.

The second consideration is my emphasis on film as constituent of political and cultural process within which ideological effects amalgamate to produce specific visions of life. My reading of the films concentrates on looking at them as excavation sites for political and ideological messages that, if viewed from a relative distance, appear to merge into a hegemonic whole.

In cinema, the question of ideology becomes clearer when a film is looked upon as a practice directed at reforming consciousness. The ideological significance of cinematic practice is most effectively exposed when we prioritize specific points in the filmic narrative where values – moral, political, social, and otherwise – are introduced, challenged and eventually resolved (or, in some cases, are left without a resolution). These points are present and function within complex systems of visual and aural codes, plot structures, as well as absences. These points are explicitly also manifested in the main themes of a film. Thematic components challenge the audience to deal with specific dilemmas, and films present their own ways of settling such dilemmas. Based on how they choose to settle these dilemmas in the context of social, ethical, political, and economical contentions of the period in which they are produced and received, films assume a presence within specific ideological hegemonies.

Since this study's goal is to explore and evaluate a corpus that consists of dozens of films, I have chosen to address filmic content in the context of broader themes. The study, therefore, does not claim to address stylistic elements of the films at hand; instead, it concentrates on categorizing general thematic preoccupations to which these films subscribe and how they interact with working-class politics of the time. To this effect, I present a reading which looks at the films in conjunction with the politics of a significant section of the working class, which at the time projected a counter-hegemonic viewpoint on Canadian politics. This is not to say that specific cinematic strategies are irrelevant to better understand and appreciate how these films worked in a counter-hegemonic fashion. On the contrary, cinematic strategies, such as the heavy-handed dramatization of certain events and stories, the choice of shots and scenes, the "dialectical" montage approach used along with Renoir-like realist techniques, etc., all play a major role in how these films worked on the social and the political levels. Chapter Eight maps out such elements by way of providing critical basis for further assessment

of the stylistic aspects of the films' discourse, and perhaps for future detailed textual analysis of specific films.

A critical area for assessing ideological intelligibility relates to the approximation of the notion of change and progress. As in other advanced civil societies, political culture in Canada traditionally regarded change as a sign of vitality and as an antithesis to stagnation – itself associated with the past and with tradition. My reading of the NFB films, therefore, also looks at how they presented a counter-hegemonic ideological perspective on the notions of change and progress, and how they linked achieving these notions to reorganizing the social and economic administration of society and moving it in a fundamentally new direction.

The materialization and fall of a counter-hegemonic discourse on the working class in NFB films was not ideologically predetermined or culturally and politically isolated, nor was it part of a free-for-all cultural public domain. As with any group of films in any specific moment in history, these films informed and were informed by struggles to create hegemonic consensus, a consensus that was constantly and simultaneously marked by incessant political contentions. The discursive surfacing of the NFB's discourse on labour and the working class, and the significance of this discourse in connection with political struggles around hegemony, were all connected with the surfacing of new initiatives within Canadian political culture in the 1920s and 1930s. The book has two main primary sources of investigation: (1) NFB films between 1939 and 1946, and (2) documents on and from around the same period representing the discourse of the Communist Party of Canada, the Popular Front and the Canadian labour movement.

In addressing the films I utilized a discursive evaluation, in the sense that I used a somewhat selective sampling of the material at hand. This sampling, however, was not arbitrary. My broad definition of the term *working class* necessitated an equally broad research strategy. In setting my research parameters I first surveyed the descriptions and contents of all NFB films between 1939 and 1946 for the purpose of identifying those that dealt with labour issues. However, I soon realized that such delimitation would not serve the purpose of a comprehensive evaluation of the ideological significance of the material. Since there were over 550 films produced during this period, and taking into consideration logistical limitations such as the non-availability of many of these films in the NFB or the National Archives, I decided to concentrate on the largest number possible of labour- and worker-related titles. Also incorporated were other films that, even if not directly addressing the topic of labour and workers, nevertheless tackled subject matter with a major impact on working-class politics.

Films from the period between 1939 and 1946, catalogued in the NFB's own list under "Work and Labour Relations" provided the primary source of my research. These films conceived workers as not incidental, but as their key subject of interest. This body of film constituted the core of my screening and evaluation. Other films closely surveyed were those dealing with working-class issues, but which were nevertheless disparately listed under other categories. Those included material under headings and subheadings that directly related to labour, such as child labour, company closures, employment and unemployment, farm workers, job hunting, retirement, strikes, training and vocational rehabilitation, unions and unionization, work and leisure, working conditions, health and safety, women and work, women and non-traditional employment. Yet other supplementary sets of films that were closely examined were found under categories that were not readily related to labour and work. These included films under headings like automation and technological change, career guides, cultural groups, disabled people, discrimination and equal rights, family life and work, historical perspectives, management issues, portraits, and women. My survey would not have been comprehensive, however, without incorporating films that dealt with topics such as communism, the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union. When early NFB films were produced, discussions around such topics impressed in major ways the ideological thrust of working-class politics both in Canada and around the world. Most films engaging these topics were found in material on World War II and the fight against fascism. In the end I was able to identify a body of films of 180 titles (of 553 films that include redundant footage simultaneously produced under various titles<sup>20</sup>) that involved at least one or more themes relating to working-class and labour politics. Over 150 of these films were eventually screened and assessed and provided the primary source for this book.

My assessment of these films incorporates what Raymond Williams characterized as the most central and practical elements in cultural analysis: cultural formations. As such, my analysis addresses the films simultaneously as "artistic forms and social locations."<sup>21</sup> It accounts for three elements: an overall review of the narrative (the main theme or topic of the film); a test of the film's positioning of the working class within the social and political events and issues of the period (the choice of the area is designated based on the main thematic or topical field of interest of the film); and finally, an evaluation of the ideological significance of the film. The order given here is not necessarily the only order in which films are discussed. In most cases, my access to these areas is interactive; it also overlaps various components that influenced and were influenced by the moment in which the films operated. Issues relating to film

structure and style are specifically dealt with in a separate section on stylistic discourse in Chapter Seven.

My analysis therefore goes beyond addressing how the films view themselves and how their role has been customarily identified; instead, it focuses on introducing and interpreting them as social and ideological constructions. This also means exploring the films' social affiliations and ideological choices, which implies situating them within a historical context. In this regard, I incorporate a comprehensive survey of the political and cultural dynamics within which these films came to exist. Specific attention is given to surveying working-class culture and politics, and to their significance to counter-hegemonic cultural practices both inside and outside the sphere of Canada's cinematic culture.

This book incorporates an assessment of the political and cultural dynamics of which the novelty or originality of NFB films came to exist. Examining the filmic discourse on the working class in the NFB films during World War II, and the years which immediately followed, meant exploring social affiliations and ideological choices. A significant amount of research covered material dealing with the history of Canadian political culture in the period between the 1920s and the mid-1940s. Special attention was given to surveying working-class culture and politics, particularly as they relate to the emergence of the communist movement in Canada, and their impact on the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practices both inside and outside the sphere of Canadian cinema. This research allowed me to locate the origins of the NFB's cinematic discourse, and consequently to determine the counter-hegemonic ideological significance of this discourse.

I have consulted original archival sources that include labour, cultural and political newspapers and journals, trade union pamphlets and congresses' reports, as well as studies on labour, culture and communism in the first half of the twentieth century. Other sources include interventions by two members of the Canadian House of Commons, one a Communist Party supporter and the other a Communist Party member. Citing these two MPs helps clarify unswerving interrelationships between the political discourse put forward through communist Popular Front policies and those found in the NFB's discourse on labour and the working class.

Whenever they exist in film and in many social and political science studies, references to Canadian communist politics are overwhelmingly filtered through second-hand information, sources and interpretations. Indeed the period at hand has been mostly pondered and analyzed based on "polarized opposites—pro and anti-Communist, Trotskyist against Stalinist, the revolutionary Third Period and the reformist Popular Front, the Communist International's Soviet line against native radical expressions."<sup>22</sup>

While I am conscious of various legitimate critiques of various aspects of the role of the Communist Party, I am equally mindful of the problems associated with a generalized and largely anti-party bias in approximating leftist politics as manifested in numerous academic endeavours. In particular, I am cognizant of the tendency to categorically reduce the CPC's practices to mere embodiment of Stalinist politics.

On the one hand, there is no doubt that the orthodox version of Marxism adopted by the Party and the Stalinized Comintern was, to begin with and at best, grounded in a selective reading of Marx. On the other, however, some of the critiques of the party are inclined to underestimate the significance of the party's Popular Front strategy that was adopted between the mid-1930s and 1940s, and to dismiss it as mere epithet to Stalinist dogmatism. Consequently, this approach ignores the impact of the party's own discourse as one viable source for understanding counter-hegemonic cultural practices in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s.

For example, original sources from the CPC are quickly and customarily dismissed in academic studies as naturally biased; hence, they are either ignored or simply supplanted by interpretive (and assumingly non-biased) views by non-party sources. In this book I insist on giving the reader an opportunity to sample first-hand accounts of the CPC's discourse during this critical period of its and the NFB's history. Considering that the book focuses on the interactivity between two discourses, that of the Party (and its Popular Front policy) and that of the NFB films, it makes sense to rely on first-hand sources from both discourses in order to draw meaningful conclusions about possible connections.

Dismissing and/or marginalizing the role played by the CPC in general led to gross undervaluing of policies that represented integral components of labour and working-class political and cultural practice before, during, and immediately after World War II. In hindsight, disregarding these policies and their bearing on Canadian politics was probably responsible for some of the existing gaps in Canadian film studies when it comes to acknowledging the counter-hegemonic ideological working of NFB films during this critical period of Canadian film history (particularly in the work of Morris and Nelson). This in turn resulted in ignoring the major effects of the Cold War on the development of Canadian cinema itself. Whether or not we agree on the extent of the damage on Canadian cinema that resulted from the Cold War, the fact is that most studies consistently downplayed the importance of NFB films during the war and almost ignored that Canada (and Canadian cinema) had its own version of McCarthyist practice, whose role is yet to be properly acknowledged and explored. In this regard, this book also hopes to contribute to the better understanding of how these practices shaped the development of Canadian cinema.

The first chapter of this book provides an appraisal of Canadian film studies literature on NFB's early films. It presents a theoretical evaluation of the general tendency among some Canadian cinema scholars to discount class. This assessment provides a basis for understanding the underlying dynamics behind traditional underestimations of the counter-hegemonic significance of these films.

Discussing pre-NFB Canadian cinematic discourse lays the ground for a coherent appreciation of subsequent shifts in the NFB's discourse and how it informed and was informed by the emergence of a counter-ideological outlook on working-class politics; it also demonstrates how this discourse represented a break from the one that dominated earlier Canadian cinematic culture. Chapter Two specifically addresses the ideological setting of Canadian cinematic culture prior to the creation of the NFB. It maps out the context within which Canadian film culture developed in proximity to an emphasis on the role of cinema as a nationalist educator, and surveys views put forward by the Canadian film industry and cultural establishments, particularly in connection with labour and working-class issues and politics.

Chapter Three outlines the emergence of Communist-based working-class cultural practices in the 1920s and 1930s. It traces expressions of counter-hegemonic practices exemplified in the emergence of the Communist Party's Popular Front policy in the 1930s and its reflection of the increased influence of and interest in working-class-based cultural and artistic practices. After this survey of the formative political, cultural and ideological elements in the development of the NFB's discourse, Chapter Four maps out various institutional and political dynamics that directly impacted the creation of the NFB itself. It describes how the ideological background and interests of some NFB founders and filmmakers, the methods used for distributing NFB films, and the paradoxical role played by the government partly shaped the parameters for the emergence of counter-hegemonic working-class discourse in the films produced by the Board.

Chapter Five explores films produced between 1939 and 1941. This is a transitional period which represents the short phase from the official creation of the NFB to just before its replacement of the Canadian Government General Motion Picture Bureau as the main producer of government-sponsored films. This period also precedes the Soviet Union's entry into war against Germany.

Chapters Six and Seven survey the films produced in the period between 1942 and 1945, where NFB films reflected a largely counter-hegemonic perspective on the role of labour and the working class in society. These films contemplate a central role for labour in the fight against fascism, and celebrate the role played by the Soviet Union both as a war ally and leading fighter against fascism and as a future peace partner. The films also

discuss economic and social issues of concern to working people during and after the war, and point out alternative social and political parameters for building Canada in the post-war period. As I discuss how NFB films tackled issues such as the Great Depression, unemployment, fighting fascism, democratic renewal, coordination between labour and management, democracy, the role of labour unions, workers' economic and social conditions, and the role of women in connection with labour, I demonstrate how the NFB's discourse fit into the ideological paradigm of contemporary counter-hegemonic working-class politics. I also address how these films contemplated notions such as building a new post-war social and political order. Chapter Eight gives a brief survey of the stylistic origins and applications that complemented and informed NFB films, and further enhanced their unique contribution to the evolution of working-class culture. The goal of this chapter is to further and more specifically demonstrate yet another dimension of how films were influenced (this time stylistically) by the left-oriented cinematic discourse of the time.

The final chapter of the book explores another transitional period in NFB's history. This one stretches between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Beginning in the year 1945, this phase witnesses the resignation of John Grierson as the NFB's Film Commissioner and the start of a major political shift in depicting working-class issues in the Board's films.

Considering that the book focuses on a corpus rather than on a few individual films, and to situate the films in an easy to follow list that is useful for quick reference, I have included an Appendix which comprises the main pertinent and standard information on the films. The Appendix also includes a secondary list of documentary films that are relevant to the topic of working-class politics and socialism in the first part of the twentieth century.

