



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

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EARLY CANADIAN CINEMA: THE BUSINESS CONNECTION

The early control by American capital over the Canadian film production industry in the 1920s shaped how cinema, as a new cultural medium, came to be perceived among the Canadian public. Despite the high level of domestic control and ownership over mushrooming exhibition theatres, and in conjunction with the explosion of film production in the United States, Canadian film distributors and theatre owners had very little to offer in terms of Canadian-made films. This eventually led to a unilateral flow of American influence over Canada's cinematic culture and practice at least up until the late 1930s.¹ Aside from non-feature tourist and advertising films and a few narrative features, film activity in Canada before the creation of the NFB was fragmentary and limited; when the NFB was later created, it filled a major gap in Canadian filmmaking and allowed for a significant shift in the way Canadians looked at film as a cultural practice.

The year 1917 was an important one in Canadian film history. It saw the creation of Canada's first private and public film production facilities and institutions. The province of Ontario became the first government in North America to create a public film board, the Ontario Motion Picture Bureau (OMPB). 1917 was also the year when the first and at the time busiest Canadian film studio opened in Trenton, Ontario, and when the federal government created the Exhibits and Publicity Bureau of the Dominion Department of Trade and Commerce. In 1923 the Bureau was renamed the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB), and remained the principal government film production vehicle until the creation of the National Film Board in 1939. The CGMPB survived, at least as an official agency, until 1941.

On another level, the Canadian film industry's development coincided with the launching of active publicity campaigns by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

The company's management was astutely cognizant of the need to capitalize on the "potential of the new medium of motion pictures" as well as the "public's fascination with trains and motion."² The way the CPR saw itself using the new medium to advance its own interests was echoed by other major players in the Canadian economy as well as by the Canadian government. The consensus within the business and government communities was that, when it comes to producing and using films, the interests of the private and public sectors were complementary and, therefore, should be maintained that way. The interests of the capitalist class were considered as one and the same as those of the entire society, and film was to play the role of a tool to promote this motto.³

When it comes to the government's own plans, they seemed to coincide with, and complement, those of big business; these plans also enhanced, albeit not necessarily defined, the way they both viewed the role of the new medium. In fact, even before cinema assumed the role of a new communication medium both the CPR and various levels of governments saw mutual benefit in using photography:

The CPR in cooperation with the federal and provincial governments and with the Hudson's Bay Company, developed plans to encourage immigration and settlement to western Canada and the development of agriculture, mining and forestry. In order to meet these objectives the CPR developed an extensive system of promotion which included the use of still photographs, illustrated lectures and testimonial pamphlets.⁴

Later the CPR contacted both British and American production companies to make films about Canada. In one case, the company produced a series of 35 film shorts in 1903 and 1904 entitled *Living in Canada*. Many of these films feature scenes that depict immigrant workers in various Canadian locations. In one of the shorts, there was even a series of scenes of a Labour Day Parade, despite CPR policy, which was not known to encourage the participation of workers in trade union activities.⁵ In 1910, the company produced a series of ten-minute films about workers, each of which presented a romantic melodrama about a worker who comes to Canada as the land of opportunity and ends up achieving economic success as well as finding lost love.⁶

Soon after World War I, the CPR and the federal government launched promotional campaigns to encourage returning veterans and British immigrants to help in the development of the Canadian west. Film was deemed an effective tool for these campaigns. Considering their previous experience in using photography, senior officials at the CPR decided that it would be more economical and more effective to

produce films in-house, as the CPR had done before when it produced still photographs and publicity posters. By 1920, the company would establish an independent motion picture production unit, in which the company maintained the majority of stock. Associated Screen News, would become the major driving force and facilitator in the development of Canadian film.⁷ In light of the later mid- and late 1920s American domination over the feature film production industry, these early documentary roots of filmmaking in Canada would later become the epithet through which Canada began to mark and define its own independent association with cinema.

As the influence of the American feature film industry increased, private and public sectors of Canadian film production shifted their interest to the area of non-feature filmmaking. By the late 1920s, the Canadian film industry's capacity to survive in the shadow of the successes of American production moguls was coming to an end. Eventually the one area within which Canadian capital was still able to sustain some high level of control was in theatre exhibition. With Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett's introduction of the first Canadian broadcasting legislation in 1932 the future of Canada's featureless film industry was now secured. The fact that "Canadians were selling American movies and watching American movies" and that they were no more "making many of their own" became a well-acknowledged reality.⁸

WORKERS ON FILM

One of the official objectives behind the establishment of Canada's first public film board, the Ontario Motion Picture Bureau (OMPBB), was to "carry out educational work for farmers, school children, factory workers, and other classes"⁹ The Board was created a little less than two years before the outbreak of the largest mass working-class revolt in Canadian history: the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. It also occurred around the same time the Russian Bolshevik revolution shook the world, and set in motion a new phase in the development of working-class politics, organization and discourse. This gives an indication of the social and political setting within which the creation of the OMPBB took place. In the same context, the federal government was itself becoming more conscious of the propagandistic possibilities of creating its own film production facilities. In hindsight, with brewing social and political instability, both provincial and federal governments could not have been motivated solely by promoting Canada's film production interests. Social instability was creating an atmosphere where cinema's role and function was opening to new political frontiers.

As I demonstrate in the next chapter, federal and provincial governments were responding to a situation where the first Red Scare was taking hold in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. As this revolution began to make sympathetic reverberations among industrial workers both on the local and international levels, and as organizing labour unions and associations became an even more highly politicized feature in working-class life, particularly in major Canadian urban centres, the business and political establishment's fear of communist influence among workers also seemed to be on the increase. The Canadian Reconstruction Association, a big-business group, sponsored a film called *The Great Shadow* (Harley Knoles, 1920).

The film was also "supported by the CPR and other major employers"¹⁰ and depicted an infiltration of a labour organization by Bolshevik zealots. Several companies in Toronto were so impressed by the film's message that they made major contributions to the actual production of the film. The film was mostly shot in the new film studios in Trenton, Ontario. Scenes with workers were shot at the Vickers factory in Montreal where "union members were recruited to serve as unpaid extras."¹¹ Upon its release, *The Great Shadow* received rave reviews in major Canadian magazines and newspapers, and employers handed out free tickets to their workers to attend the showings. The film became one in a series of at least nine films that "depict[ed] the insidious, and immediate, Bolshevik threat to the American way of life."¹² Peter Morris quotes *The Motion Picture World's* review of the film:

[The film] told the story of a union headed by Jim McDonald (played by Tyrone Power) struggling with a gang of Bolsheviks led by Klimoff (Louis Strene) "planning to wreck the government and society by poisoning the mind of organized labour." In sympathy with the reasonable demands of his men is capitalist Donald Alexander (Donald Hall) whose daughter Elsie (Dorothy Bernard) is in love with a secret service agent (John Rutherford). The propaganda of the Bolsheviks sweeps aside McDonald's reasoned arguments and a strike is called. Incendiarism and sabotage follow and McDonald's child is killed. Elsie is kidnapped by the Bolsheviks and rescued by her lover who captures the agitators. Public opinion is stirred and at a union meeting, McDonald wins over the men and "an armistice between capital and labour providing no strikes for twelve months is arranged."¹³

Another, lesser known, film of the time was *Dangerous Hours* (Fred Niblo, 1920). The film presented a similar cautionary tale but this time about a young American university graduate who is seduced into a violent class struggle by a female Bolshevik

agitator. There are several flashback scenes about the Russian Revolution, most of which depict the destruction of churches and the “nationalization” of women.¹⁴

Referring to the period prior to the establishment of the NFB, Ted Magder points out that the need to promote the government’s views on issues affecting Canadians, including those related to unemployment and labour problems, could have been behind the interest in creating a federal government film agency. He suggests that the creation of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau in 1923 was directly connected to the rationale of providing a basis for stronger government and business control over an emerging working-class political culture:

The films produced by the Bureau in its early years of operation clearly fit into the reconstruction plans of the Canadian state. Government officials and private business people were particularly concerned over the prospect of a post-war depression. Moreover, an increase in labour strife and growing ethnic and regional tensions, including the rise of protest parties, suggested a very unstable post-war climate.¹⁵

To begin, the government had no clear notion of how to foster a politically effective action that could eventually use film for the national interest of all Canadians. A less inconspicuous objective, however, was the government’s interest in tackling the more pressing problems of the rise in labour activity and the growing signs of pre-Depression economic problems. The manner in which the government packaged its intent to manage potential social unrest was manifest in its increased emphasis on the notion of national unity. The government sought the use of cinema not only as means to “attract new investment capital and hard-working immigrants,” but also as a tool to “nurture that illusive sense of ‘national unity and pride’ that the politicians of the centre so desperately sought.” Only then such an investment would be “worthwhile indeed.”¹⁶

As labour tensions increasingly became a feature of Canadian politics, and fearing the volatility of the social and political situation among working-class people both locally and internationally, the Ontario government began to increase its involvement in the production of films, particularly those dealing with labour issues. The context within which the government became involved here was through producing educational films that addressed the situation of industrial workers. However, as Shelley Stamp Lindsay’s study on the 1921 Ontario Provincial Board of Health production *Her Own Fault* shows, the government’s interest in labour education basically boiled down to maintaining social and cultural control.

As it dealt with problems facing Toronto's working-class women and their "work and leisure habits" in the early part of the twentieth century, *Her Own Fault* stressed personal inadequacies, inefficiencies and unhealthy habits of workers as major causes behind the degradation of their quality of life. The film demonstrated how the different habits of two morally and ethically dissimilar women workers affected their lives:

Eileen, a model employee whose sensible habits make her a productive worker and ultimately place her in line for a promotion; and Mamie, a slacker whose unwholesome lifestyle lands her in the hospital with tuberculosis, unable to work. Each embodies a different attitude to the new urban, industrial environment in a structural opposition governed by the patterns of the work day. Beginning as each rises and readies for work, parallel editing contrasts the workers' activities outside the factory; later, two-shots of the women at work on the same factory bench demonstrate the impact that each worker's lifestyle has on her productivity.¹⁷

In contrast to the way NFB films would later stress ideas about social and collective responsibility, *Her Own Fault* argues that the individual responsible behaviour of workers represents the first step in solving their social and economic problems. Equally as important, the film implicitly emphasized labour and working-class problems as non-political issues and inadvertently warned against seeking political solutions to problems of workers' alienation and class exploitation. In a broader context, this reiterated a hegemonic common-sense outlook on workers' issues as personal issues in need of personal solutions. It also affirmed the image of the woman worker as an inferior Other who is in need of nurturing and guidance.

Clearly, the government was essentially using film as a viable tool to neutralize potential instability both inside and outside the workplace. Equally as important, film was inadvertently utilized as means to combat the radicalization of working people, and more specifically, to stem the growing tide of union and socialist influence among them. As such, film as a potential discursive political practice at the time reflected the confluence of interest between the capitalist class and the government.

Unlike later NFB's screening practices – particularly its emphasis on screening films in community and union halls, as well as its effort to encourage audiences to discuss the topics dealt with in the films – earlier government-sponsored screenings basically built upon and encouraged the passivity of the spectator. In the attempt to promote their own political agendas, and even as they officially despised the way commercial theatres were prescribing to public immorality, federal and provincial governments stressed the use of private film exhibition and distribution outlets. Even

when films were screened in factories and for a targeted working-class audience, the setting was still chosen by way of controlling the audience's reaction as to not allow any possible discussion of the politics of these films.

Along with their paternalistic educational messages, government and privately supported films effectively reaffirmed the passive receptive practice of the spectator vis-à-vis events and views that were presented on the screen. Groups of workers were encouraged to see specific films, such as *The Great Shadow* and *Her Own Fault* as part of company-controlled special screenings. As such, the establishment's definition of educational cinema meant instructing people on ways of dealing with their problems while discouraging them from discussing and voicing their own views about them. As Lindsay asserts, "by exploiting motion pictures and the field of commercial amusements, even to such a limited degree, the government show[ed] its willingness to exploit new technologies for the purposes of social control."¹⁸

With *Her Own Fault* the [Ontario] government interven[ed] in the entertainment sphere, hoping to sway the behaviour of Toronto's working women. It appeal[ed] to factory workers whom it most [sought] to address not simply by locating screenings in working class areas, but by presenting its message on the movie screen, that consummate symbol of urban pleasure in the early twentieth century.¹⁹

Considering that up to the early 1920s cinema was itself still conceived of as a lower and working-class form of entertainment, the government's use of commercial outlets represented a rewarding and effective tool to reach and influence its target audience.

CONNECTIONS TO NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY

Aside from occasionally documenting adventures by Canadians to explore and conquer their rough environment (such as the 1928 film *In the Shadow of the Pole*) or paying tribute to Canada's participation in World War I (including *Lest We Forget* in 1935 and *Salute to Valour* in 1937), most Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB) films from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s focused on celebrating the beauty of the Canadian natural landscape. Even after the introduction of sound, the Bureau's films "continued to portray the same golden wheatfields, the same leaping salmon and tumbling waterfalls as in pre-sound days, except that now they were accompanied by spoken dialogue and music."²⁰

The period between the wars witnessed the rising influence of Canadian nationalism. This occurred in conjunction with a growing interest in educational and cultural organizations and institutions, and several groups were set up by upper and middle-class professionals and educators. These included the National Council of Education and the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (formed in 1919), the Canadian Authors' Association (1921), and the Canadian Historical Association (1922). Other groups included the Young Canada movement, the Banff School of Fine Arts, the Radio League, and the Workers' Education Association. In 1935, three important cultural institutions were created: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Association for Adult Education, and the National Film Society of Canada.²¹ All these groups functioned within the parameters of broader political and cultural discursive formations that invariably accentuated nationalism (particularly national unity and national education), as an ideological alternative to what was considered as the degradation of culture and identity. By understanding the hegemonic nature of the nationalist discourse advocated by sections of the Canadian economic and political elite in the period before World War II – including the National Film Society and the National Council of Education – we inadvertently begin to comprehend the depth of counter-hegemonic significance of the NFB's later emphasis on class. As we will see later, the NFB films contrasted the nationalist discourse with one that focused on class identity.

In his essay on the shaping of Canadian film culture of the 1930s, Charles Acland argues that this culture became the “crucible” which enhanced “the formation of the question of national culture as one of national education.” He also suggests that the 1930s became symptomatic of the “contradictions [that were] inherent in the designs of [Canadian] national culture.”²² In this context, semi-official cultural institutions such as the National Film Society (NFS) were essentially preoccupied with discussions of how Canadians were to emerge as national citizens “with the desired characteristics.”²³ However, it was the class background and interests of the members of these institutions that ultimately designated the scope and the limitations of these groups' activities as well as the realm of their cultural influence:

[The groups'] class specificity meant that voluntary organizations were structurally restricted to those who had the cultural capital to participate, who had free time, and who shared in a particular taste formation that would encourage them to attend, say, a lecture about Eisenstein's *October* rather than a Hollywood film. A country-club atmosphere prevailed, with a small group of individuals (mostly white, Anglophone males) forming what would be the defining moment of Canadian cultural nationalism.²⁴

The notion of national unity, however, originally began to evolve as a buzzword in the establishment's cultural rhetoric throughout an earlier period of the twentieth century.

Hegemonic discourse since the early 1900s stressed forging a Canadian culture that reflected the national identity of Canadians. In this regard, the English-Canadian power establishment looked in suspicion towards what it regarded as foreign cultural influences and intellectual movements. As Maria Tippett points out, supporters of an authentic Canadian culture in the first forty years of the twentieth century did not appreciate what they regarded as symptoms of an unhealthy national spirit:

They felt that the “cultural and creative life of Canada” was inhibited by “timidity; staidness; a sense of inferiority; a lack of confidence.” And most significant... by “a wholesale looking outwards for ready-made standards or complacent acceptance of existing things as good enough.”²⁵

Clearly, the quest for a nationally authentic culture essentially meant a search for a cultural identity for those who inherited British background and traditions. More to the point of this study, the emphasis on national culture during this period also meant denial of class specificity and identity and consequently of contradictory class interests and divisions. It epitomized the Canadian elite's discursive emphasis on the myth of a classless society and the pre-eminence of a nationalist Canadian identity.

As Ian McKay suggests in his analysis of Helen Creighton's work on the politics of anti-modernism, the emphasis on national authenticity has roots in nineteenth-century romanticism and twentieth-century irrationalism, “most notoriously under fascism”:

Since the nineteenth century, many nationalists have argued that the culture of the unlettered peasant folk encapsulated the natural “cultural core” before it was complicated (and perhaps corrupted) by society. The “lore of the folk – their ballads, sayings, superstitions, and so on – could be seen as a treasure transcending all division of class and ethnicity, and binding the nation together. Cultural “authenticity” was often defined to mean faithful adherence to a supposedly “original” form.²⁶

The assumption among many of those who advocated a national identity between the wars was that Canadian society is originally based on a certain “organic unity.”²⁷

The establishment of the National Council of Education (NCE), the National Film Society (NFS), and later, of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), came in conjunction with the rise of Canadian nationalist rhetoric in the aftermath of Britain's official declaration, which relieved Canada's colonial status. Charles Acland discusses how Canadian film history traditionally ignored the influential role of the NCE in the development of Canadian film culture, and as part of the Canadian business establishment. The NCE, Acland argues, promoted a specific version of nationalism by emphasizing the need to "improve popular taste," and strengthening the trilateral connection between government, business, and educational instruments of society.²⁸ Ironically, this ideologically loaded connection originated in none other than 1919 Winnipeg, the time and site of Canada's first major working-class uprising. Acland describes some of the dynamics behind the creation of the NCE:

[...] the NCE began as a direct response to recommendations from the 1919 Winnipeg conference on "Education and Citizenship," organized by the Canadian industrial Reconstruction Association to discuss national unity in the service of industry. The conference delegates agreed upon the need for a national organization for education and Canadian citizenship. When the NCE emerged the following year to fulfill that purpose, much of its support came from those same business interests, including Sir Edward Beatty, President of the Canadian Pacific Railway, who later became the council's Honorary Vice-President.²⁹

Irrespective of the irony of this organization's creation around the same time and place as Winnipeg's infamous General Strike, the policies advocated by the NCE implied some diametrically different concerns from those advocated by working-class people at the time.

As striking workers in Winnipeg were being branded as foreign subversives, since a sizable number of the participants in the general strike movement were of Eastern European and Russian origins,³⁰ the NCE for its part was advocating the reaffirmation of the British character of Canada. In the minds of the NCE's membership, British and Christian traditions were what defined the qualities and ideals of the Canadian national identity. But equally as important, the NCE had a relatively clear view vis-à-vis what was expected from labour. In a letter by the council's "most influential member," Major Fred J. Ney urged workers "to combat softness, slackness, indifference and indiscipline, and stimulate discipline and a sense of duty and alertness through national life."³¹

In hindsight, Ney echoed the previously mentioned film *Her Own Fault* and its ideas of dealing with working-class problems. His emphasis on individual discipline carries striking resemblance to the film's views about the behavioural characteristics of "soberness," "naturalness" and "hygiene" as fundamental elements to workers' success, safety and happiness. Ney's ideas on discipline were viewed as the hallmark of national identity and dignity, and as recipe for all Canadians to follow, irrespective of their class background. According to the NCE, the individually responsible citizen was prescribed as the cornerstone of a proud and prosperous nation. This inter-connection between nation and individual comprised a critical component in the NCE's rhetoric and enhanced the development of the nationalist discourse:

The implications of this articulation are substantial, for if we are going to speak of the emergence of a discourse of cultural nationalism in this country, we also need to understand the conjuncture which produced particular formations of what this means. The historical instance demonstrates particular imaginings about the workings of the individual moral will and a related biological claim that someone must choose for "the people ..."³²

Finding its cinematic translation in the NCE's subsequent denouncement of the "foreignness" of certain films that threatened the "upward march of civilization,"³³ the nationalist discourse became largely symptomatic of the ideological core of the ominous rhetoric of fascism. The nationalist rhetoric was originally promoted by government and mainstream intellectuals alike. Gradually, however, and as it began to show more explicit sympathy for fascism, the government establishment began to distance itself from the NCE's pronouncements. This allowed mainstream politicians to adopt new approaches that did not necessarily agree with the NCE's approach.

Outside of the nationalist discourse, other influences in the early part of the twentieth century were simultaneously having their own impact. These influences were also contributing to the creation of an alternative outlook on the role of Canadian cultural practice. Maria Tippett draws a picture of how foreign stimulus played a critical role in expanding the horizons of Canadian cultural practices beyond narrow nationalist discourse:

Whether, then, English-Canada's cultural activity was influenced by imitating foreign models, affiliating with foreign organizations, associating with movements based abroad, or taking up residence outside the country, the process was a very important factor in its making for it ensured that work would not be provincial

and narrow, and able to do no more than meet the standards of a small and closed community. By moving it onto the international stage, that process at once fostered the growth of cultural activity in English-Canada, giving it a quality and finish it would not otherwise have had.³⁴

The influence of socialist and working-class cultural practices in the early twentieth century had a clear resemblance to these foreign cultural influences that Tippetts talks about, the least of which is how they subscribed to an ideology that was self-proclaimed as internationalist. Yet it was the dynamics of working-class involvement in radical and socialist politics within Canada itself that later gave rise to the broadly based counter-hegemonic cultural movement in the 1930s, which in turn paved the way for a new discourse on this class within emerging Canadian cinema.