



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

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# 1 SOCIAL CLASS AND THE NFB'S EARLY FILMS IN CANADIAN FILM STUDIES

Images of the working class and issues relating to class in general are present in a wide range of Canadian films. Yet there is evidence of a general failure in most critical/historical studies to pay proper attention to the role of the working class and class-based issues in Canadian cinema. Until today, there has not been one single book on the working class in Canadian cinema.<sup>1</sup> There has been a Marxist film scholarship in Quebec (visible in an old journal called *Champ libre*) and in occasional monographs about Quebec cinema in French, but its corpus is radically different, it shows the influence of the French academy more clearly, and it dates from the 1970s primarily. While there are some notable exceptions with considerable contributions in this regard, there remains a great need of a systemic effort more specifically on the part of English-language scholarship to fill this important gap in Canadian film studies traditions. The study of the NFB's depiction of class is just one among numerous areas that are still in need of exploring.

Throughout its history, cinema in Canada explored numerous aspects in the lives and politics of working-class Canadians. Hundreds of documentary and fiction films pondered what it means to be a worker, and assessed the role of workers as they evaluated their social, economic and political contributions in Canadian history. Countless films also told stories about the unemployed, the poor, unions and union activists. In this regard there were myriad pioneering efforts by filmmakers such as Evelyn Cherry, Jane March, Stuart Legg, James Beveridge, Tom Daly, Stanley Hawes, Raymond Spottiswoode and later by Allan King, Gilles Groulx, Arthur Lamothe, Denys Arcand, Maurice Bulbulian, Martin Duckworth, Studio D, and Sophie Bissonnette among many others. Efforts by this diverse group of Canadian artists resulted in a wealth of films that variously depicted the struggles, victories and defeats of Canadians of working-class background. Films produced by the NFB between 1939 (the initial year of its creation) and 1946 were among the earliest indicators of a genuine interest in

depicting social class by filmmakers in Canada. During this critical phase in Canadian film history, these films deliberated issues such as unemployment, economic prosperity, World War II, democracy and post-war construction.

While cultural studies in the UK were particularly sensitive to class differences in their study of cultural texts, the tendency in the United States and Canada was to effectively downplay class. While a good deal of work in other disciplines such as history, labour studies, and Canadian studies focused on aspects of the representation of labour in Canadian cinema in connection with issues of unemployment, poverty, gendered divisions of labour, work and technology, etc., the depiction of the working class per se mostly remained unevenly scattered across the domain of English-Canadian film criticism.<sup>2</sup>

There is, nevertheless, a body of work that has occasionally appeared over the last two decades which engaged the discussion of class in Canadian cinema. In particular, some writings by Robin Wood, Yvonne Matthews-Kline, Thomas Waugh, Scott Forsythe, and more recently Brenda Longfellow, Janine Marchessault, Susan Lord, John McCullough, Darrell Varga and Malek Khouri among others, made some inroads towards putting class and class analysis on the agenda of Canadian film criticism. Yet, the study of the topic remains largely marginalized in the canons of Canadian film studies, which stays aloof (and at times theoretically prescribing in its approach) when it comes to inscribing class into its corpus.

English discourse on Canadian cinema largely privileges the focus on this cinema's national identity. Over the years this substituted for the examination of social class, and until recently, most other social and cultural identities such as gender, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation. In this chapter I present an overall evaluation of English-Canadian film studies' approximation of the issue of class and then focus on its assessment of the films produced by the National Film Board of Canada during World War II.

The first section of this Chapter examines the general framework of the discourse on Canadian cinema: its history, its theoretical premises, and its main preoccupations. It surveys notions of Canadian nationalism as criteria that had a major impact on this discourse, ever since interest in Canadian cinema began to take shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It also tackles how nationalism contributed to marginalizing the exploration of issues related to class. The next section deals specifically with English film studies' approximation of NFB films of the war period. More specifically, it describes how the underestimation of class eventually led to bewilderment in relating to the centrality of the working-class discourse within these films and the counter-hegemonic significance of this discourse.

## THE ELISION OF CLASS IN CANADIAN FILM STUDIES: A THEORETICAL EVALUATION

Theorizing Canadian cinema envisages national consciousness as a distorted reflection of an Other's cultural domination: that of the American mass culture and its overwhelming influence on the Canadian cultural landscape. A pre-eminent example of the application of the notion of ideology in Canadian film criticism is in its assessment of the relationship between the United States and Canada, how this relationship shapes the ideological perspective of Canadians, and how it is ultimately reflected in Canadian cinema. This determinist perception of the function of ideology underestimates how different social and political forces function within the process of ideological stabilization and/or destabilization of any given hegemony.

Interest in Canadian cinema coincided with a growing nationalism that typified grassroots activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For many Canadians on the left of the political spectrum, including a growing number of film critics, nationalist anti-Americanism exemplified and shaped in a substantial manner how they analyzed Canadian cinema. This period witnessed growing opposition to American military interference in Vietnam. On Canadian university campuses, students rallied against Canadian industries supporting the war and in opposition to what they conceived of as American control of the Canadian economy, educational institutions, and cultural infrastructures. Within this atmosphere, finding a position that identified with the struggle to develop and define a genuine Canadian cultural identity constituted a central element in how a great number of educators, writers, and critics saw their role and position in society.

Gradually, many English-Canadian film reviewers and critics began to define Canadian cinema through traits characteristic of a so-called Canadian experience. These traits were introduced as embodiments of national identity and were also identified as expressions of resistance against dominant power structures (mainly associated with U.S. economic, political, and cultural hegemony). Within this paradigm, the discourse on Canadian cinema explored variable ontological and epistemological binaries between Canadian and American film models. It also gave priority to examining Canadian culture in conjunction with its unequal relationship with that of the United States. This claimed relationship was also considered a major source of the malaise that dominated the Canadian cultural psyche.

In 1973, Robert Fothergill proposed that a specific "Canadian condition" is systematic in themes of Canadian films. These films, he argued, mostly depicted the

“radical inadequacy of the male protagonist – his moral failure, most visibly in his relationships with women.” Fothergill equated this “impediment to satisfactory self-realization” by this protagonist with the psychological inferiority that characterizes the relationship between the younger and older Canadian and American brothers.<sup>3</sup> Fothergill’s emphasis on the inferior relationship between Canada and the United States essentially shaped early Canadian film studies. It also informed its theoretical application of the notion of ideology in relation to Canadian cinema.

In 1977 Peter Harcourt made one of the most lasting marks on Canadian film criticism. Despite its limited nature and scope, his book *Movies and Mythologies: Towards a National Cinema* became one of the most influential attempts to provide a comprehensive theoretical context for the study of Canadian cinema.<sup>4</sup> Basing his analysis on Roland Barthes’ study on mythology, Harcourt focused on the specificity of Canada’s “dependence on Europe” and its “proximity to the United States” and how this encourages Canadians to look at themselves as reflected in “other people’s mirrors, in terms of alien mythologies.”<sup>5</sup>

Harcourt linked Canadian cinema’s ability to express the real identity of Canadians to the level by which it articulated the depiction of Canada’s own myth. Through his reading of contemporary Canadian films, Harcourt identified recurring themes, all of which, he argued, dealt with the failure of our society to provide meaningful roles to its members.<sup>6</sup> As a result, films repeatedly present stories about adolescence, dropouts, criminals, “or simply about wild and energetic characters” like the protagonists in Pearson’s *Paperback Hero* or Carter’s *Rowdyman*, both of whom “end up acting destructively because there is nothing else to do.”<sup>7</sup> Harcourt proposed specific criteria for analyzing Canadian cinema: a main concern, he suggested, should be how the experiential dilemmas of film characters locates them vis-à-vis their national identity.

Harcourt claimed that film criticism should be able to “un-conceal” the workings of the filmic text.<sup>8</sup> The methodological focus here was on searching the textual tangles of films to locate the specific myth of Canadian national identity. With the text as the main subject of analysis, studying Canadian identity was deliberated as reciprocal to the task of deciphering its metaphoric textual unfolding on the screen. Inadvertently, this meant that bringing into discussion topics that were beyond the issue of Canadian national myth and identity represented an imposition of some sort on the central thematic preoccupations of what were identified as Canadian films. On the methodological level, this approach also implied that evaluating elements that were outside the immediacy of the filmic text risked impressing the critic’s own pre-conceived agenda on the reading of films.

In hindsight, Harcourt's critical approach alluded to the relationship between, respectively, concealed and dominant Canadian and American cultures, both of which inhabited ideologically predetermined filmic texts. Consequently, to this approach, the implications, interests, themes, and characters of a specific filmic text including those related to class, essentially became superfluous to critical analysis. With the emphasis on the film text, the task facing film scholars was to apply the prescribed formula of national alienation to an essentially static text which functioned as mere ideological reflection of the unequal relationship which bounded and shaped Canadian entity. As such, even bringing into discussion extra-textual elements relating to history, culture and social dynamics became an unnecessary intrusion of what was conceived as an ideologically pre-determined text. Nevertheless, it is important here to stress that at the time when Fothergill and Harcourt were making their propositions, no one else was substantially taking up the question of Canadian cinema.

The general framework of Harcourt's approach continued to inform the main parameters of Canadian film criticism. A variety of critical forms that stress national identity as an expression of an inferior consciousness, and/or prioritize the filmic text as the main subject of analysis remain constituent of English-Canadian film criticism. In one example, Mike Gasher, two decades after Harcourt, attempts to demonstrate how a Canadian voice has been historically derailed:

The colonization of the material means of Canadian film distribution and exhibition denies Canadian feature film a mass audience in its own country and contributes to a larger media environment starved of works addressing Canadian themes and Canadian stories, and global issues treated from a Canadian perspective.<sup>9</sup>

In response, Gasher calls for the "decolonization" of Canadian "cultural imagination" by introducing a "self-generated" – rather than externally imposed – Canadian imagination. He argues that Canadian film practice and production could present a challenge to the hegemony of Hollywood cinema in Canada only when it acknowledges that "there is another way of film making and there is another world view."<sup>10</sup>

In another variant of the nationalist trend, an article on genre and Canadian cinema by Jim Leach in 1984 summarizes the main concerns of the Canadian genre as expressions of the gulf between "Canadian reality" and the dreams that underpin American genres: "the measuring of Canadian culture and society against the American standards," Leach writes, "becomes (implicitly or explicitly) a major concern of Canadian genre films." Once again, he refers to Peter Pearson's film *Paperback*

*Hero* (1973) as a classical story about a Canadian who invests his life in emulating the “glamour drawn from American westerns that is hopelessly at variance with the drab reality of his small-town existence in Saskatchewan.”<sup>11</sup>

In a comparative reading in 1989 of the endings of two films, one American and one Canadian (George Lucas’s 1973 *American Graffiti*, and Sandy Wilson’s 1985 film *My American Cousin*, respectively), Joanne Yamaguchi illustrates the dissimilarity between the sensibilities of the two cultures that they reflect:

The epilogue of *My American Cousin* is warm and positive (Mom was right, boys are like buses). Even its negative aspects are without a bitter edge (never saw my American cousin again), since no news is good news in the sphere of epilogues. By contrast, the *American Graffiti* epilogue is tainted with an underlying resentment, a cynicism implying that people and situation of great promise inevitably fall from grace (a promising student becomes a car salesman).<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, posing it against the nihilism of its American counterpart, Yamaguchi concludes that the Canadian experience is more hopeful.<sup>13</sup> As she refers to differences between the two national cultures, the writer reverses Fothergill and Harcourt’s earlier pre-conception of the Canadian protagonist as lost and pessimistic, and attributes it instead to the protagonists of the American film. However, as it suggests an optimistic approximation of what constitutes a Canadian experience, Yamaguchi’s reading, in a similar manner to what was proposed by other nationalist critics, continues to prioritize an assessment of a dichotomy between two fixed sets of cultural and ideological frameworks: one for the dominating, and another for the dominated.

This influential, albeit not necessarily any more dominant approach in English-Canadian film studies, basically favours a deterministic understanding of ideology, which underestimates social, political and cultural dialectic. It relegates ideology to a static and predetermined function, which in itself results in adopting an ahistorical reading of Canadian cinema. It also confines to marginality the role played by contradictory political and cultural forces within Canadian society and emphasizes, instead, a generic Canadian subject that stands above heterogeneous social identities including those based in social class.

As it explores variable ontological and epistemological binaries between Canadian and Hollywood cinemas, and as it isolates the assessment of those binaries from their broader historical context, the nationalist tendency remains confined mainly to assessing the dichotomy between Canadian and American cinematic models. As such, it tends to favour assessing a victimized Canadian social subject who is conceived as a

passive object on the receiving end of the negative impact of a dominant ideology. On the one hand, this form of ideological determinism, similar in its critical limitations to various forms of social and economic determinism, de-historicizes the study of Canadian cinema. On the other, it discourages the assessment of diverse social representations – including the representation of class.

I am certainly not suggesting that addressing issues of national identity has no relevance to Canadian film criticism; to simply dismiss the question of national identity does not lessen its ideological relevance to critical discussions on Canadian cinema. However, histories of national cinema also need to be assessed as histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation. Dealing with issues of ideology and ideological dominance as they impact national consciousness also has to account for the contradictory social interests and values that underlie it.

As they premise their reading of Canadian cinema on a static nationalist textual perspective, some critics fail to address how, for example, the main protagonists in the 1970s film classics *Goin' Down the Road* (Don Shebib, 1970), as well as *Rowdyman* and *Paperback Hero*, among others, all happen to come from working-class backgrounds. They also ignore that the dilemmas faced by these characters are inflicted by a specific socio-political moment in Canadian history. Viewed as analogies to Canada's inferior relationship with the United States, the protagonists of these films are prescribed as alienated individuals incapable of belonging or having an identity of their own. In the end, such fatalistic acceptance of dominant ideology becomes characteristic of these characters' behaviour ... as Canadians! Under these terms, as Robin Wood points out, defining Canadian identity becomes synonymous with negative descriptions such as "less confident, less assured, more tentative, more uncertain, less convinced, etc."<sup>14</sup> As a result, the social background of characters as well as their place and temporal settings become non-issues for the film critic. This, however, is not the only context within which the marginalizing of class occurs in Canadian film studies.

In some cases the neglect of class takes the form of direct rejection of the mere relevance of the discussion on social representation. Still, this usually relates to the general emphasis on national identity to which I alluded earlier. Basing his argument on the assumption that Canadians are inherently passive on the political level, John Hofsess, for example, argues as far back as 1975 against incorporating the theme of social and political resistance into the reading of Canadian films. Even during the socially turbulent period of the Great Depression, he argues, Canadians always maintained a fatalistic attitude towards politics.<sup>15</sup>

Ironically, Hofsess grounds his argument in letters written by R.B. Bennett, the Canadian Prime Minister whose policies between 1930 and 1935 encountered fierce

and broad working-class resistance, leading to one of the largest protest campaigns in Canadian history, better known as the *On-to-Ottawa Trek*. The campaign involved workers and the unemployed in a cross-country mobilization going to Ottawa to protest against government policies of creating what amounted to forced-labour camps for the unemployed. The protest was eventually halted after the RCMP intervened. Clashes in the streets of Regina in 1934 resulted in one death and several injuries. Hofsess nevertheless dismisses these events “as one or two exceptions” to the more prevalent Canadian attitude that shows “astonishing deference to authority.” Precluding Peter Harcourt and other nationalist film critics, Hofsess says:

This mental habit, suggesting Canadians have many moods, their most resonant one being despair, persists in many of our novels and films. Think of *Goin’ Down the Road*, *Wedding in White*, *Mon Oncle Antoine*, *The Rowdyman*, *Paperback Hero*: good stories, fine acting, profoundly poignant moments, but nowhere a character with the brains, balls, will or gall to master life as it must be lived in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

This passivity, Hofsess argues, represents the feature of Canadian cinema and therefore any critical assessment of it is unaffectedly bound to focus on the state of despair that domineers Canadians. Hofsess’s clearly reflects a classic nationalist rationale for the elision of class. But his approach by no means predominates Canadian film studies’ approximation of class-related issues.

Over the years, there emerged several areas of exploration that have affected discussions on class and social change in Canadian cinema. One important example is the discussion on cinematic form and its relevance to addressing the representation of class and class-related issues in Canadian cinema. Michel Euvrard and Pierre Véronneau, for example, examined the contradictions inherent in using specific formal strategies. As they discussed the impact of these strategies on addressing the politics of class, they critiqued the role of the *cinéma direct* movement that emerged in Quebec in the late 1950s, and how it was not able to advance a socially committed cinema. They stressed that clarity of political perspective remained the most crucial element in determining the significance of cinema as a socially radical art form:

The [cinéma] direct allowed certain filmmakers to conceal their ideological haziness, or even their reactionary ideologies, by confusing the means with the end and by turning the direct into an ideology itself. On the other hand, some were

able to exploit new possibilities offered by the direct, in order to give their analysis of social reality greater effectiveness, by drawing closer links with life.<sup>17</sup>

Euvrard and Véronneau disputed that the overemphasis of form was the determining element in shaping a socially interested cinema. Similar caution against relying on alternative formal techniques as a means to forward social and political messages was raised by Seth Feldman in connection with the 1970s NFB's program *Challenge for Change*, a series that stressed the use of film as a tool for discussing issues of social justice. Feldman questioned the legitimacy of the program's celebrated emphasis on giving a direct voice to those who are incapable of articulating their own concerns. He argued that thinking of this practice as a prerequisite to dealing with the concerns of Canadians of working-class background was based on erroneous assumptions and would lead to wrong conclusions.<sup>18</sup>

Another area which relates to social class was the discussion on Quebec filmmakers of the early 1960s to late 1970s. In an anthology on filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, Susan Barrowclough focuses on his rejection of "naturalist mimeticism" and discusses the constraints of linear narrative. She also spotlights his preoccupation with creating cinematic social commentary "which goes beyond the tangible to concentrate on the dreams, the fears, the historical make-up of people and the personal apprehension of a collective experience."<sup>19</sup> Barrowclough then discusses how the interest in class in Quebec cinema blends with other social and political concerns. She argues that in Lefebvre's films, for example, the specific interests of working-class women are depicted in connection with patriarchal domination, particularly as they relate to issues of "managing house and suffering the constraints of rather traditionally-minded men."<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Euvrard and Véronneau point out how filmmakers such as Lamothe, Groulx, and Dansereau examine the conditions of working-class communities in urban and suburban Quebec. They describe how they used film as an instrument for social action, and by way of encouraging broad discussions on labour strikes, factory shutdowns, and unemployment; they also demonstrate how these films eventually contributed to mobilizing forces of resistance among striking workers and unemployed Quebecers.<sup>21</sup> They also point out that these filmmakers succeeded in convincing groups "such as people on welfare, construction and textile workers, lumberjacks and miners" to appear on screen, and in giving them the "right to speak out."<sup>22</sup>

Euvrard and Véronneau focused on the politics that characterized Quebec cinema beginning in the late 1950s and how this intersected with the direct emphasis on social activism. They argued that the subsequent flourishing of Quebec cinema between

1968 and 1973 was directly linked to the rise of nationalist consciousness in the late 1960s and increased resistance to national oppression.<sup>23</sup> But while the emphasis here was on dealing with a politically conscious Quebec national identity – as opposed to presumably an ideologically alienated Canadian nation – and on tracing connections between class and national oppression, issues relating to social class by other critics were presented as mere peripheries to the discussion on the Quebec national question.

In yet another take on Canadian cinema's incorporation of class, this time comparing Quebec and English Canada, Piers Handling discusses direct cinema.<sup>24</sup> He states that in spite of their good intentions, filmmakers in the NFB's English Unit B were never able to present tangible political analyses of class:

One can trace a strong line developing from *Paul Tomkowicz*, through *The Back-Breaking Leaf*, to *Goin' Down the Road* (1970) Don Shebib's landmark feature, and other English-Canadian films of the seventies. Each has a strong sense of realism and a social conscience, yet none broadens its analysis onto a political level, although the subjects seem to point them in this direction. While the Québécois filmmakers were living, and making film, in their own peculiar social, economic and political environment, the English filmmakers were separated from their roots and from a similar context of development.

In a variation on a similar theme by earlier nationalist critics, Handling identifies yet another manifestation of Canadian ideological passivity, this time in relation to cultural rootlessness that he prescribes as the basis for English-Canadian filmmakers' neglect of social and political analysis.

Contrasting Quebec and English-Canadian cinemas, James Leach similarly suggests that Quebec filmmakers are distinguishable by their ability to identify social sources of oppression. Filmmakers in English Canada, on the other hand, function in "an environment in which psychological pressures are real but political solutions are difficult to envisage."<sup>25</sup> Leach sees the tendency by English-Canadian filmmakers to place their characters outside of social antagonisms as a reflection of the pacifying ideological reality that dominates the political landscape of their film characters. He goes on to say that "characters are prevented from attaining a political consciousness by the illusions created by the prevailing ideology."<sup>26</sup>

In hindsight, what appears to usher much of English-language studies on Quebec cinema and its interest in social class is its reflection of a national consciousness of Quebec society. In this regard, ideology is once again perceived either as one's own, in which case it becomes liberating and capable of allowing us to become conscious of

social dichotomies, or as that of an Other, where it tends to dominate and deprive its carrier from recognizing the dynamics of social relationships and political antagonisms. In both cases, there is an underestimation of the significance of ideology as an element of hegemony and as a dialectical process which is open to resistance and to social and political contest.

Another variation on the theme of national cinema relates to the polemic proposed by another prolific Canadian film scholar. In his essay "The Cinema that We Need" Bruce Elder expounded on the need to overcome the critical preoccupation with the "distinctiveness" of Canadian culture. However, his idea for overcoming such a preoccupation was through unmasking "how events come to be in experience, that is, the dynamic by which events are brought into presentness in experience."<sup>27</sup> This can only be articulated through creating an alternative to Hollywood's classical narrative structure, he argues. While Elder disagreed with Harcourt on what constituted a Canadian cinema (Harcourt emphasized narrative thematic content, while Elder accented textual form), both stressed the filmic text as the main viable subject of analysis. In other words, it was the *authored* text that remained at the core of cultural processes. In the end, both versions of the Canadian-based discourse on Canadian cinema forced a detachment between the socio-historical context and the function of the film as a text. Two conclusions can be deduced from this critical logic: either that the text is a fixed ideological construction, and accordingly there would be no point in alluding to its relationship with specific social and historical moments; or that history and social structures themselves are fixed phenomena of which a text can only mirror eternal essences – which calls the entire notion of history into question.

Harcourt and Elder's variations on the theme of Canadian cinema evolved over the years, and took new forms. Furthermore, new critics revamped the general criteria that characterized these two approaches, sometimes by stressing different social identities and the multiplicity of voices within Canadian culture (specifically through emphasizing gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and class), and other times by finding formal niches to contest the Hollywood model both ideologically and stylistically (postmodernism has been a major attraction over the last couple of decades). What remains invariable in much of the newer discourse on Canadian cinema, however, is the reductionism in interpreting ideology and ideological workings.

A significant push towards a new outlook on Canadian cinema as part of broader aesthetic, cultural, social and political processes has been taking place over the last two decades. Important advances have been made in addressing this cinema's treatment of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. These readings enhance a socially conscious outlook on the depiction of marginalized identities. But even as they diverted from

earlier nationalist perspectives, and as they attempted to invoke a much needed refurbished appreciation of heterogeneity within Canadian society, some of these writings remained entangled within a form of reductionist understanding of ideology and ideological working; within this reductionism a near elision of class continues to mark the canonical parameters of Canadian film studies.

In an effort to identify with the realities and struggles of marginalized social subjects, some of the more recent readings of Canadian cinema (such as in some of the work of Christine Ramsey)<sup>28</sup> position these subjects in a stationary dichotomy with a static centre of power. In most cases, this centre continues to gravitate around the United States. Even when the identified centre is not simply perceived as the United States, there remains an underestimation and mystification of the poignant dialectics that inform relationships between a dominant centre and dominated margins, including, for example, the dynamics of social struggle and resistance. By viewing Canadian national consciousness as a mere reflection of unequal relationships, some English-Canadian film criticism prescribes a specific critical task: studying how films depict Canadian inferiority in relation to various sources of ideological domination. This task replaces the contemplation of the dynamics of cultural and political hegemony. It also relegates social and cultural subjectivity to the confines of pre-assigned attributes and functions. The result is under-appreciation of the liberating possibilities inherent within and without social, political and ideological power structures. For that matter, locating and assessing counter-hegemony and counter-hegemonic practices, a topic at the centre of this book's endeavour, becomes at best a non-issue or an area that is not worthy of exploration. Eventually, by underestimating historical specificities and how they inform and are informed by non-static ideological workings, critical analysis reduces ideology to an eternal essence of political and social domination.

Both nationalist and non-nationalist models appear to share similar elucidations of ideology in connection with film: (1) both models account for the specificity of the film text as the basis for their critical analysis. Clearly, given the fact that films (or bodies of film) are the main subjects of analysis, this point of departure is natural and crucial. But as they tentatively acknowledge the social and political conditions within which a filmic text exists and operates, their reading of the text still tends to undervalue the significance of the film text as one among several other structural elements in the social body, or structure, of the cinematic text. Instead of conceding and incorporating diverse super-structural (e.g., legal, political, philosophical, ethical, religious, educational) and infra-structural (e.g., social, historical, economical) elements of analysis as structural overdeterminants, both critical models reduce the affectivity of ideology in film to the textual and/or narrative determinants. (2) These models conceive of ideology

as a reflection of sameness. Rather than accounting for ideological working as the functional and operational similarity between two autonomous spheres (e.g., ideology as an element of the superstructure *and* the social and economic base) the main critical focus is on unmasking what is hidden in the mirror/text as an ideological reflection. Eventually the main task of the critic is centred on restoring or unmasking the authenticity of the national or social subject. (3) Authorship is confined to its original and/or originating textual source. The social author function of the subject/spectator and/or reader is reduced to passive audience receptiveness. In the end, looking at social and political subjectivities without appreciating how they enforce, reinforce and resist ideological hegemonies and how they potentially enunciate counter-hegemonic alternatives, lessens the interest in studying films that might possess non-normative ideological functions.

## CLASS, POLITICS AND THE STUDY OF NFB WAR FILMS

Despite the significance of the body of NFB films produced during the World War II period in assessing and analyzing the development and historical dynamics of Canadian cultural and cinematic discourse, English-Canadian film criticism has largely presented a limited view of the ideological workings of these films. Among the prominent works in this area are Gary Evans's *John Grierson and the National Film board: the Politics of Wartime Propaganda* (1984) and *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (1991). Another is D.B. Jones's *Movies and Memoranda* published in 1981. These books provide overviews of various episodes in NFB history and elaborate on interactions between the development of the NFB and its founder John Grierson's documentary aesthetic. Peter Morris's 1971 book *The National Film Board of Canada: The War Years* includes few contemporary articles on the NFB, and a select index of the films. Graham McInnes and Gene Walz's more recent book *One Man's Documentary* (2005) is an excellent memoir of McInnes's own experience as screenwriter within the NFB during its early phases of existence. Other writings focus more specifically on John Grierson. These include *Grierson on Documentary*, a collection of his writings published in 1966. Edited by Forsyth Hardy, the book contains a chronologically organized selection of Grierson's writings, speeches and interviews. In 1984, *John Grierson and the NFB* was prepared by the John Grierson Project (a project initiated by McGill University) and brings together a large collection of remembrances by people who knew and worked with the NFB founder.

*John Grierson: A Guide to References and Resources* (1986) is an extremely helpful book in pointing out the origins of Grierson's philosophical associations and ideas. Joyce Nelson's book *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (1988) presents a revisionist approach to the work of Grierson and its impact on Canadian cinema – one I will deal with separately later in the chapter. Gary Evans's latest Grierson book is *John Grierson: Trailblazer of Documentary Films* (2005), which presents a novel-like approximation of Grierson's contribution to documentary filmmaking.

The NFB and the role played by John Grierson is also among the subjects in three anthologies on Canadian cinema: *The Canadian Film Reader* (1977), edited by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson; *Take Two*, edited by Seth Feldman (1984); and *Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas* (1980), edited by Pierre Véronneau and Piers Handling. Other studies assess various aspects in Grierson's legacy with even more specific attention made to his concept of film as contributor to social change. Two examples are Peter Morris's articles "Backwards to the Future: John Grierson's Film Policy for Canada" in *Flashback: People and Institutions in Canadian Film History*, and "After Grierson: The National Film Board 1945–1953" in *Take Two*. Grierson's interest in documentary as a medium for promoting social and political change was also the subject of numerous articles. Of particular interest are Jose Arroyo's "John Grierson: Years of Decision" in *Cinema Canada* and Peter Morris's "Praxis into Process: John Grierson and the National Film Board of Canada" published in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*.

Other more recent work from outside Canada on Grierson include the 1990 *Film and Reform, John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* by Ian Aitken, *Claiming the Real, the Griersonian Documentary and its Legitimations* (1995) by Brian Winston, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, influence* (2000) by Jack Ellis and *From Grierson to the Docu-soap* (2000) by John Izod and Richard Kilborn. The last four titles appeared over the last decade and reflected renewed interest in Grierson's work from the point of view of revisiting its influence as well as its confines on documentary filmmaking practices. Pierre Véronneau's third of his three-volume collection on the history of Quebec cinema, *L'Histoire du cinema au Quebec, III. Resistance et affirmation: la production francophone a l'ONF – 1939–1946*, published in 1987, offers the only serious attempt to deal with the role and function of the NFB in relation to Quebec during the war period.

Most of the above-mentioned writings provide a positive assessment of Grierson's efforts to use film as a socially conscious educational tool (aside from the work of Nelson, later articles by Morris, and Winston's book). They are largely sympathetic to his views on the role of government in supporting documentary filmmaking. Some of

these studies describe Grierson's background as a film commissioner in England, his fascination with early Soviet cinema and its emphasis on social and political issues, and his interest in dealing with issues relating to labour. They also appraise his emphasis on cinema as a nation builder. Studies on the NFB and Grierson remain an important source of information for assessing the complexities of the period. They particularly provide extensive data of Grierson's political and personal history as well as his writings, speeches, and actual film work in Britain and in Canada.

However, by overemphasizing the personal drama of Grierson's life, some of these studies, particularly the Canadian studies, tend to underestimate the discursive dynamics that ushered in the work of the NFB during its early years of existence and within which Grierson functioned as Commissioner. In general they tend to present Grierson's legacy – and consequently the whole NFB history during the war years – in a largely narrow biographical or/and filmographical fashion. More importantly, a crucial aspect of their critical shortcomings is in how they overwhelmingly ignore the role played by oppositional social and political forces of the left. As such, these studies ignore the function of counter-hegemony in influencing the ideological and practical parameters of early NFB films, and consequently only marginally address them as extensions to the discursive social, political and historical setting within which they were made. Furthermore, these studies tend to only footnote the NFB war films as evidence to understanding the social and political dynamics of the period. No studies have so far attempted to provide an elaborate assessment of the films themselves as social and political signifiers of the war period or in connection with their depiction of social identities. M. Teresa Nash's 1982 McGill University dissertation on how these films represented women remains the only and most comprehensive attempt to exclusively deal with the films in terms of their social significance and impact.

In the late 1980s, Grierson's politics, aesthetic and formal interests, as well as his emphasis on propaganda as an educational tool, all came under vigorous re-examination. A critique of Grierson is found in Peter Morris's "Rethinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson" published in *Dialogues* and originally delivered in a lecture at the 1986 conference of the Film Studies Association of Canada. Morris revisits Grierson's writings and suggests that his traditionally celebrated organic approach and thinking have certain affinities to the philosophical roots of fascism. For her part, Joyce Nelson in *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend* (1988) presents an important reassessment of what she considered as negative impact of Grierson on the development of Canadian cinematic culture.

Nelson's watershed book was the first Canadian effort to polemically engage the ideological impact of Grierson's work during the period of World War II. In her

assessment of the NFB's work Nelson rejects the characterization of Grierson's interest in documentary as an expression of left-wing or even liberal political orientation. She argues that film to Grierson merely represented a public relations arm for emergent multinational capitalism, and that NFB films made during the war were based on aesthetic and political strategies that were obnoxious and repressive. Even the anti-fascist films, she stresses, were authoritarian in their tone.

As she acknowledges the importance of assessing the historical context of the films, Nelson all but ignores the presence of left or communist social and political forces, let alone the presence of a counter-hegemonic discourse at the time. She also does not acknowledge the role or views of left-wing labour unions, parties and movements and their impact on shaping the discourse of NFB war films; instead, she summarily claims that these films reinforced workers' submission to capitalist ideology. In one example of how erroneous conclusions are drawn from de-historicized reading of films is Nelson's assessment of the role of the Labour-Management Committees (LMC) during the war, a role that was depicted sympathetically in NFB war films.

The LMCs were created in the early 1940s by way of developing a social and political partnership, which in addition to labour also involved the participation of management and government. This partnership was to help improve working and living conditions for workers, and in the process meet the urgent demands of wartime industrial production. An important aspect of the NFB's discourse on the partnership between workers and business related to the role of these Committees. Nelson argues that the emphasis on the role of the Committees by these films proves their anti-labour views.<sup>29</sup> She does not however account for the position taken by labour itself and by its left-wing supporters. In hindsight, her analysis dismisses the role played by these forces in pushing for the creation of these committees; it also ignores the discourse within which labour conceived of the creation of these committees as an indication of its own success, first in uniting forces in the war against fascism, and second in achieving a higher level of a coequal relationship in the management and decision-making process within the workplace. Later, after the end of the war and the beginning of the Cold War, those committees became among the first casualties to be targeted for abolishment by big business and the government.

Nelson's analysis is largely informed by the nationalist discourse on Canadian cinema, which paints a mainly passive depiction of the Canadian social subject. Tom Daly, a veteran editor and filmmaker in the NFB who worked closely with Grierson during that periods responded to Nelson's critiques by pointing out their narrow historical perspective:

[Nelson] wrote very well when putting things together to make her case, but if you go back to the sources, you see that she left out lots of key stuff in the dot-dot-dots that would undermine her case. And she was always reading in hindsight with her present-day attitude towards things, as if everyone should have had that attitude back then.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, the lack of a multifaceted reading of cultural politics and the politics of culture during this period of Canadian history essentially leads Nelson to erroneous conclusions as to the actual significance of NFB war films. This brings us back to the importance of incorporating an inter-textual approach to reading film.

As Raymond Williams would argue, opening a film text to a broader context traces relation between the different signifying systems of a culture.<sup>31</sup> As I discussed earlier in the chapter, the passive approximation of Canadian subjectivity and of history is itself based on a deterministic understanding of ideology as an all-encompassing domination. This essentially leads to sentencing to virtual insignificance or failure any attempt to pose counter-hegemonic alternatives to the status quo. In this regard, it comes as no surprise that Nelson, along with some film-studies scholars of the NFB, tends to ignore even the mere possibility of influences from outside the hegemony of the upper classes during that period in Canadian history.

Particularly missing from the Canadian material dealing with the NFB and Grierson is the role played by labour and the Popular Front policy, which was promoted both before and during the war by the Communist Party of Canada. Studies on this period's NFB and Grierson tend to neutralize the varied political and cultural dynamics that were part of the process of shaping Canadian hegemony. They particularly ignore references to the role played by the oppositional social and political forces of the left. As such, these studies, for all intents and purposes, actually erase the function of counter-hegemony in informing the ideological and practical parameters of the work of the NFB during this period. Indeed, they have taken for granted that John Grierson was either a social progressive or a minion of a new industrial establishment, often with little supporting research.

Over the years, however, there have been some studies that show a different appreciation of the role played by the NFB during the war. Indeed, some of these studies even addressed the issue of the depiction of class in intersection with the historical moment that surrounded the creation of the NFB. Of particular note is Barbara Halpern Martineau's article "Before the Guerillieres: Women's Films at the NFB During World War II" published in the *Canadian Film Reader* (1977).

Martineau examines the work and impact of Canadian women filmmakers during the war. She traces how their films address working-class concerns, and emphasizes the need to provide an analytical outlook which goes beyond the limitations of gender-based criticism. Martineau suggests that “as for women’s films of the past the pressing need [for feminist film critics] is for rediscovery and description.” As she analyzes the work of contemporary filmmaker Jane March and her effort to document the social difficulties faced by working-class women, Martineau criticizes the inability of some feminist film critics to recognize March’s and other contemporary filmmakers’ work simply because these filmmakers did not “conform to the expectations of conventional phallic criticism.”<sup>32</sup>

Charles Acland’s work on Canadian cinematic culture in the period after World War I and just prior to the establishment of the NFB is also of particular significance to the re-assessment of the work of this institution. Acland’s articles “National Dreams, International Encounters: The Formation of Canadian Film Culture in the 1930s” and “Mapping the Serious and the Dangerous: Film and the National Council of Education, 1920–1939” (respectively published in 1994 and 1995) bring forth issues that are useful to assessing the development of Canadian film discourse of the period. Equally as important, Acland brings to light arguments which are critical to understanding the hegemonic significance of the development of Canadian cinema during World War II. For its part, Manjunath Pendakur’s work on the political economy of the film industry in Canada (1990), and Ted Magder’s assessment of the history of the relationship between the Canadian government and Canada’s film community (1993) both represent examples of an interest in studying the discursive dynamics of Canadian cinematic culture. These studies also provide important grounds for further assessing how Canadian cinema deals with social class and the role of class in Canadian culture.

An important feature in the history of left-wing and communist culture and politics in Canada in the 1930s and 1940s resulted from the international communist movement’s major changes in its political strategy. The Comintern, the organizational link between communist parties around the world, re-examined its policies in 1934, in order to take into account the new political situation and the experiences of communist parties. In Canada, communists and social democrats (members of the CCF) within the Trade Labour Council were moving toward unity and cooperation within the Canadian trade union movement. Changes also involved building a united workers’ and Popular Front in the struggle against fascism. Popular Front strategy patterned the philosophical base of the counter-hegemonic discourse during this critical period of Canadian and NFB history. The movement associated with the front expanded its influence beyond the Communist Party and the militant working-class and labour

movements. Indeed, the strength of this movement enabled it not only to put forward a working-class perspective on contemporary issues, but also to present it as that of an emerging counter-hegemonic historical bloc.

The discourse of NFB films was itself similarly informed by this same socially and politically heterogeneous mass movement. While it incorporated a loosely defined working-class perspective outlook based on the ideas of the Popular Front, this discourse sought a consensual approach to dealing with social and political issues of the day. It also offered a counter-hegemonic perspective which supported and celebrated ideas such as: cooperative and centralized social and economic planning, an increased and equal role for labour in social and political administration of society, an appreciation of the role of labour in production value creation processes, new outlook on the role of working women, and the linking of economic production to social needs rather to capitalist profit. All these ideas were offered as commonsensical alternatives that were integral to building a modern progressive society.

