

## Short Takes: The Canadian Worker on Film

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Résumé de l'article

Y-a-t-il un film sur la classe ouvrière Canadienne? Après un siècle de réalisation de films au Canada, la réponse est incertaine. Les travailleurs canadiens figurent en effet dans une variété de documentaires et de grands films, mais leur présence fait souvent partie d'un processus annexe ou secondaire de documentation et de fiction. Il existe aussi des oeuvres dont l'objectif est de se concentrer sur l'histoire de la classe ouvrière, mais la mise en valeur de ces films reste relativement insuffisante. Alors que le film est devenu l'un des langages de communication les plus importants à la fin du 20e siècle, l'histoire visuelle pourra certainement bénéficier de la collaboration étroite entre les historiens et les cinéastes.

# Short Takes: The Canadian Worker on Film

David Frank

## *Take One*

LONG EXTERIOR: It is snowing. The wind is blowing. There is a large building at the top of the hill. The professor is walking up the hill to this building. As we look over his shoulder we see that it is a research library. But will it be useful in researching the history of film? And what if the professor wants to know about the history of Canadian films, by which in this case we mean films that tell stories about Canada and Canadians? And what if the subject is the appearance of the Canadian worker in such films? In short, is there a Canadian labour film? Roll titles.

## *Take Two: Titles*

Close Up, Interior: It is a library book shelf. Not a long one, for there are not many standard titles on the history of Canadian film, and they can be squeezed in between books such as *The Australian Film Reader* and *Cinema and Politics in the Third World*. The standard Canadian titles stand out — *Embattled Shadows*, *John Grierson and the National Film Board*, *Hollywood's Canada*, *Canada's Hollywood*.<sup>1</sup> Film studies in Canada seem to have been largely nationalistic in spirit, rather like the older studies of broadcast history. There is room here for a more critical perspective, and it is starting to arrive in the newer titles. Cut to Michael Dorland, *So Close to the State/s*, with its useful reminder of the prominence of governmentality in the construction of the field of film studies in Canada. Pan along

<sup>1</sup>Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Montréal 1978); Gary Evans, *John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda* (Toronto 1984); Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of our National Image* (Toronto 1975); Ted Magder, *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Toronto 1993).

to a feminist reading of Canadian film under the title *Gendering the Nation*.<sup>2</sup> A wide-angle view also gives us the nearby shelves, with periodicals such as *Cinéaction* and the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*; both interpret their mandate as global in scope, even while devoting substantial space to Canadian subjects.

There are at least two recent reference works on the library shelves, but on first inspection the labour film seems relatively invisible in these pages. A filmography of Canadian features for the period 1928-1990 includes 1,341 entries. The subject index has no references to "labour," "work" or "workers"; there is one entry under "strikers and strikes" and there are two additional entries under "unions." The three titles in question include *Les 90 Jours* (1959), a film written by Gérard Pelletier about a strike in a single-industry town in Québec during the Duplessis era; *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks* (1985), Donald Brittain's docudrama about crime and corruption on the waterfront after the removal of the Canadian Seamen's Union; and *Labour of Love* (1985), a more lighthearted television movie about a union organizer who comes down from Ottawa to the Miramichi to support five strikers at a local garage. There are more entries under general headings for themes such as "Business and Industry," "Mines and Mining," and "Clerical Workers." And turning through the short plot summaries, it is possible to detect recurring signs that the working-class experience has not been entirely overlooked in Canadian feature films even if it has rarely been the main focus of productions. In the first few pages we encounter plot summaries such as these: "Lumberjack O'Brien works in a lumber camp in the Canadian Northwest. Chandley is the romantic interest" (*Rough Romance*, 1930); and "Mercer, a Scottish cleaning woman, claims that Cooper, a Canadian in the Black Watch Regiment, is her son" (*Seven Days' Leave*, 1930). Or, among more recent productions, here is the plot summary for *Les Tisserands du Pouvoir 2: La Révolte* (1988): "Gélinas is the patriarch of a French-Canadian family that had gone to Rhode Island to work in the textile mills. His memories include labour disputes and a fight to maintain use of their language in the parochial schools."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, a major two-volume bibliography on Canadian film and video also seems discouraging on first inspection. There are no entries in the subject index for "labour," "unions" or "workers," and only two very specific items under Trades and Labour Congress and Trade Union Circuit. There is, however, an interesting group of more than 30 entries under the genre title "Industrial Films/Cinéma industriel." This consists mainly of references to periodicals such as *Canadian Business* and *Industrial Canada* and, in smaller numbers, the old *Canadian Congress Journal* and *Canadian Labour*. The annotations describe the use of film

<sup>2</sup>Michael Dorland, *So Close to the State/s: The Emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy* (Toronto 1998), and Kay Armatage, Kass Banning, Brenda Longfellow, and Janine Marchessault, eds., *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema* (Toronto 1999).

<sup>3</sup>Ian K. Easterbrook and Susan Waterman MacLean, comps., *Canada and Canadians in Feature Films: A Filmography, 1928-1990* (Guelph 1996), 5, 216-7.

for promotion, publicity, training and education purposes on the part of business and labour, with most of the references dating from the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the lack of appropriate subject references, this large two-volume reference work contains numerous entries for individual films and film-makers. In the search for the labour film, this source will be useful in developing supplementary documentation.<sup>4</sup>

From the library shelves we track our way to a display terminal. *Film/Video Canadiana*, a bibliography produced by the National Film Board in collaboration with the National Library, National Archives, and Cinémathèque Québécoise, is available to us in a 1994 edition on CD-ROM. This database contains some 30,000 Canadian film and video productions, about 18,000 in English and 12,000 in French. In the English-language database there are 5,800 NFB titles and 12,500 by other producers; among the French-language productions there are 4,000 NFB titles and 8,000 from other Canadian producers. The coverage dates from 1939 in the case of the NFB titles and from 1980 for other titles. Using a list of 12 search terms, we scan the English database for uses of these keywords in both subject and synopsis fields, with the following results:

Search Word	Subject	Synopsis
labour	11	41
labour history	0	4
labour organization	0	4
strike	3	61
strikes	29	26
trade unions	1	12
union	100	155
unions	38	44
work	42	1227
worker	2	105
working class	11	31
working-class	6	15

In each case it is possible to call up the full text for the entry. After allowing for the deletion of inappropriate references and limitations in coverage, this is still an enormous archive of references to visual evidence concerning workers and their

<sup>4</sup>Loren Lerner, ed., *Canadian Film and Video: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature*, 2 vols. (Toronto 1997), 84-88 et passim.

place in Canadian life. Indeed it can be overwhelming, as occasional television interviews sit side by side with major productions.<sup>5</sup>

In this quest, we may also pass through the screen into the world wide web. One standard bookmark is the Internet Movie Data Base [www.imdb.com], one of the largest and most frequently used film sites. In response to keyword queries with various combinations of the words labour/union/worker/work and Canada/Canadian, this popular site was capable of producing only one palpable hit, in the form of *Canada's Sweetheart*. Meanwhile a visit to the National Film Board site [www.nfb.ca] yielded 342 individual entries under the category "Work and Labour Relations" (one of 87 subject categories). The earliest entry in this list was also the NFB's first production, *The Case of Charlie Gordon* (1939), a film addressing issues of youth unemployment and commissioned by the Dominion Youth Training Programme. Clearly, the NFB had counted the labour film within its mandate from the very beginning, and even as the NFB seems to be in retreat from active film production it continues to distribute selected independent productions that fall within this scope.

Keep in mind that the Canadian worker also shows up in unexpected places. The surly handyman played by Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen* (1951) claimed to be a Canadian, an effect no doubt of the notorious Canadian Cooperation Project of the time that promoted gratuitous mentions of Canada in Hollywood films, but still within the meaning of our inquiry as an identifiable appearance of the Canadian worker on film. Similarly, when k.d. lang bundles herself onto a company airplane departing for a remote work site in the north in the opening scenes of *Salmonberries* (1991), surely she too can be counted as a Canadian worker (although some plot summaries describe her as an "Alaskan pipeline worker"). But there is no need to be exhaustive at this stage in the search. It is clear that, as the librarians say, there are weak bibliographic controls in this field. Our survey will remain preliminary, and the search will remain far from comprehensive.

Unfortunately there is nothing in Canada that is the equivalent of Tom Zaniello's book about labour films, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff*. It is a wonderfully useful reference work, a selective, critical guide to films about workers and unions, mainly in the American context. He identifies the films, discusses the contents, proposes supplementary reading, organizes them by occupational groups and social themes. There are only a few Canadian entries in the volume, but Tom promises more Canadian content in a revised edition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>*Film/Video Canadiana 1994* (Montréal 1994) [CD-ROM]. Unfortunately, the coverage is increasingly incomplete, as this publication was suspended after the 1995 edition. The CD-ROM was issued only in PC-compatible formats; in my own search it was not possible to install the Windows version, nor was it possible to print entries. These suggest some of the reasons to prefer internet websites as research tools.

<sup>6</sup>Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films about Labour* (Ithaca 1996). For my review, which includes suggestions for additional Canadian entries, see *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), 292-5.

*Take Three: Flashback*

Now the action moves from bibliothèque to cinémathèque, from the realm of the printed and electronic word to the world of visual documents. The importance of such a distinction was pointed out as early as 1898, at the very dawn of the age of film, by a pioneer cinematographer who called for the establishment of public institutions to collect — and preserve — this new form of cultural production. That advice was largely ignored, until it was too late and much of the unstable nitrate-based film stock in use prior to the 1950s had dissolved into brown dust or gone up in smoke. With apologies to Walter Benjamin, we may wish to pass a comment on this particular irony of cultural production in the age of mechanical reproduction! As a result, in this kind of retrospective survey of perishable evidence we will have to use our imagination.<sup>7</sup>

The first films made in Canada were at once novelty items and travelogues. They appealed to curiosity but also supplied information about the country. Many of the early films focused on natural wonders such as Niagara Falls and various exotic winter activities such as skating and snowshoeing, but there was also a significant amount of attention to the economic life of the country and the consequent opportunities for employment. The appearance of this theme was not an accident, as film was rapidly recognized as an effective means to attract interest in immigration. The earliest example is that of a British immigrant from Bristol, who settled on a farm near Brandon, Manitoba in the 1880s. A former printer and publisher, James Freer started making movies of farm life as early as 1897, only a year after the first public exhibitions of motion pictures on theatre screens in Canada. Freer's early films, none of which have survived, included such apparent pioneering epics of Canadian social realism as: *Six Binders at Work in Hundred Acre Wheatfield*, *Typical Stooking Scene*, *Harvesting Scene with Trains Passing By*, and *Cyclone Thresher at Work*. A year later, Freer was conducting a lecture tour in Britain under the sponsorship of the Canadian Pacific Railway; a second tour was later supported by the Department of the Interior.

The CPR proved especially enthusiastic about using film to promote immigration to "the last best west," and the company contracted with both British and American film companies to make films about Canada. For instance, the *Living Canada* series of 1903 and 1904 consisted of some 35 short films — including views of immigrants arriving at Québec City, and scenes of lumbering, harvesting, and ranching activities. Interestingly, film historian Peter Morris has pointed out that the Bioscope Company of Canada, set up by the British film producer Charles Urban, did not always follow the CPR's instructions "not to take any winter scenes under any conditions;" this independent-mindedness on the part of the film-makers may also account for the inclusion in this series of scenes from a Labour Day Parade in Vancouver, for the CPR was not known to encourage the recruitment of workers

<sup>7</sup>Sam Kula, "Film Archives and the Centenary of Film," *Archivaria*, 40 (Fall 1995), 210-25.

with union ideas. In addition to these short documentaries, there were also story-films with more substantial plot-lines. In 1910 the CPR commissioned a series of ten-minute romantic melodramas presenting Canada as the land of opportunity for the ambitious young worker, in this case with special attention to recruitment from the American labour market. Surviving examples from this series include *An Unselfish Love* and *The Song that Reached His Heart*, each featuring a male working-class hero whose hard work on the resource frontier brings not only economic rewards but also reunion with his lost love. One intriguing title from this series was a Romeo-and-Juliet of the Alberta coal mines, released under the title *A Daughter of the Mines*. And *The Little Station Agent* was the story of a capable young woman who operated a railway depot in the Rockies, where she fended off unwanted lovers and prevented train wrecks.<sup>8</sup>

These early productions remind us of a time when Hollywood did not exist, at least not in the way it did after Hollywood came to dominate film production and distribution after the end of the silent era. Before that happened, a certain amount of diversity in North American film culture was possible. Given the low survival rates of early film stock, it is difficult to be certain of the numbers or to discuss the content in any depth, but it is clear that several interesting Canadian films were produced during this era. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the early movies were patronized by working-class audiences. As Steven Ross has pointed out in his study of this era, this context helps explain the positive images of workers, and sometimes unions, that are visible in pre-Hollywood films, notably in the work of D.W. Griffith and, from the point of view of a comic anti-authoritarian, that of Charlie Chaplin. It is part of Ross's argument that the movies helped workers to "visualize" class in the silent era, but that this became less possible as the structure of production and consumption changed.<sup>9</sup> Although no study of the theme has yet been undertaken in the Canadian context, the movies were occasionally the subject of comment in the labour press. Chaplin, for instance, received a favourable review in the pages of the *Maritime Labour Herald* in 1922: "The only fault with Chaplin comedies is that they end," noted a contributor, "One could sit and watch 'The Idle Class' until Europe pays the United States her war debts."<sup>10</sup>

While it is easy to lose sight of much of the early film production, we are grateful for the visual evidence that does remain available for scrutiny. None is more famous than Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Although originally rejected by most distributors, following its release the film was acclaimed as a masterpiece of social observation and the art of storytelling. In John Grierson's

<sup>8</sup>The discussion in this and the previous paragraph is based on the evidence in Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 30-44.

<sup>9</sup>See Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton 1998). For a review, including suggestions for the Canadian research agenda, see *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 259-62.

<sup>10</sup>*Maritime Labour Herald*, 25 February 1922.

words, *Nanook* was "a record of everyday life so selective in its detail and sequence, so intimate in its shots, and so appreciative of the nuances of common feeling, that it was a drama in many ways more telling than anything that had come out of the manufactured sets of Hollywood."<sup>11</sup> The film can also be described more prosaically as the record of one man on the northern shores of Hudson Bay going about his daily chores of hunting, fishing, travelling, and building, or at least acting out these routines for the benefit of the camera that follows him. At this level, *Nanook* may be considered a story about a man and his work, invested with significance by the realist aesthetic of the film-maker. Many subsequent NFB films produced by "the children of Grierson" — such as the profile of tobacco pickers in *The Back-Breaking Leaf* (1959) to take one influential example — have also aimed to invest similar meaning in the working lives of their subjects.

A neglected but interesting film of the 1920s was *Carry On, Sergeant* (1928).<sup>12</sup> The film was planned as a tribute to the long-suffering heroes of the Canadian lower ranks in World War I. Directed by the British writer and cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfeather, the film was launched with great expectations (including support from investors such as Arthur Meighen and R.B. Bennett) and, despite the disappointment of its financial failure (and lack of an American distributor), it remains an interesting example of Canadian attempts to come to grips with the wartime experience. For the purposes of this discussion, what interests us is that the film features a working-class hero. In the early scenes prior to the war in 1914, Bob MacKay and his buddy Syd Small are presented as industrial workers employed at the Atlas Locomotive Works (soon to be converted to wartime munitions production). MacKay is what labour historians will recognize as an "honest workingman," a self-respecting, dependable, productive worker who takes his work and responsibilities seriously; his chief ambition is to wed his sweetheart, who works at the local 5 and 10 store. By contrast, Small is the comic relief, an idler who cannot be taken seriously by the foreman and must be protected from his own follies. Their world of pipes and boilers and smoke is far different from the handsome country lodge where the company president entertains visitors. But when the war comes, there is no question how these workers will behave: "It didn't much matter whose war it was, or what about," says the silent title, "MacKay and others just had to go." The war turns out to be more than a "great adventure;" it is instead "the championship disaster of the world." MacKay struggles his way through the trenches, gas attacks and enemy fire of the front lines, and his travails justify the film's final dedication to "all those unsung heroes who silently make history by just 'carrying on'."

<sup>11</sup>Quoted by Dorothy Harley Eber, "True North," *Horizon Canada*, Vol. 5 (1987), 1416.

<sup>12</sup>This film was unfortunately named, at least for the purposes of film history. "Canada Carries On" was later the NFB's premier domestic wartime series. And then there were the "Carry On Gang" British comedies of the 1950s and 1960s. For the background to this film, see Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 71-80.



Finally, may we comment on one Hollywood film, on the grounds that it includes one near-Canadian scene? The director King Vidor originally thought of this film as a portrait of the struggles of an "average fellow" caught up in the hopes and dreams of the white-collar working class. The original working title was "One of the Mob," but the M-G-M producer Irving Thalberg thought that "Mob" made it sound "too much like a capital-labour conflict" [sic]. They settled instead on "The Crowd." The Canadian scene, or what we may choose to view as a Canadian scene, takes place on a hillside overlooking Niagara Falls. Our hero believes he has escaped from the drudgery and anonymity of his office job. He is about to be married and start a family. Niagara roars silently, and there are no disappointments of any kind in sight. As the story unfolds, however, his expectations are betrayed, and the American Dream resolves itself into a series of setbacks and frustrations. Although the film is placed in the so-called Roaring Twenties, it conveys a mood of uncertainty and malaise that seems to anticipate the Great Depression. As such this remarkable film strikes a dissonant note within the emerging Hollywood consensus of the 1920s on the satisfactions of North American civilization.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Take Four: Documentary*

The documentary tradition looms large in any discussion of Canadian film. The founder of the National Film Board in 1939, John Grierson, had been a promoter of the documentary film—some observers claim he invented the word, at least in its English-language translation from the French "documentaire"—as early as the 1920s. Grierson always distinguished his work from what he considered mere travelogues or lecture films and staked out his territory in his famous description of the documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality." He regarded the documentary as the greatest achievement of the film culture of his time; Hollywood productions were in his view mere "movies" designed for the purposes of escapism and entertainment, and he specifically discouraged the idea that the NFB, or Canadian film-makers generally, should become involved in making feature films.<sup>14</sup> While Grierson's film aesthetic may have been limited by his preoccupation with the documentary, it is notable that much of the Canadian feature film tradition as it later developed contains significant traces of the documentary legacy.

The wartime NFB films are a familiar reference point for film historians, but they are also important for labour historians. Under the direction of Grierson, the NFB saw itself as a branch of the state dedicated to the mobilization of citizens for public purposes connected to the war itself and the construction of a post-war liberal democracy. During the war this meant, among other things, the making of films that promoted the enlistment of women in the armed forces as well as into the civilian labour force in unprecedented numbers. Some 50,000 women enlisted in

<sup>13</sup>King Vidor, *A Tree is a Tree* ([1952] New York 1977), Chapter XIV.

<sup>14</sup>John Grierson, "A Film Policy for Canada" [1944], in Doug Fetherling, ed., *Documents in Canadian Film* (Peterborough n.d.), 51-67.

the several women's services, and at the height of wartime demand about one million Canadian women had entered the full-time labour market, many of them in non-traditional sectors directly related to war work. Several of these films have received close scrutiny in recent years, and the NFB has released a series of these, mainly related to enlistment, on a compilation videocassette that allows for easy access for study purposes.<sup>15</sup>

Films such as, *Wings on Her Shoulder* (1943) and *Proudly She Marches* (1943) portrayed the participation of women in the armed forces in positive terms but also depicted the situation in not-so-subtle ways that identified women's roles as abnormal, secondary, and temporary. No one voiced this limitation more succinctly than Lorne Greene, in one of his voice-over narrations, when he stated that the "girls" employed in industrial establishments were finding factory work "no more difficult than house work." It was even more clear in post-war films such as *Careers and Cradles* (1947) that the promises of women's equality implied in wartime films were not central to Canada's plans for reconstruction. In one of her influential studies of the mobilization of women for the war effort, Ruth Roach Pierson has concluded that little permanent change in the status of women resulted from the wartime experience, and that by the end of the war "Traditional attitudes about women's role held sway once more and the contribution that women had made to the war effort was allowed to fade quietly from public memory."<sup>16</sup>

Part of an effort to recover those memories, *Rosies of the North* (1999) is a new NFB film that takes us to Fort William (now part of Thunder Bay) where Canadian Car and Foundry operated Canada's largest World War II aircraft plant. While the majority of the work force were male workers, about 40 per cent of the workers were women. The film uses round numbers of about 7,000 workers, of whom 3,000 were women.<sup>17</sup> The film treatment cuts back and forth between present and past, as the women review the evidence of their experience and share personal observations. As such it seems very much an exercise in a visual form of oral history. From these women we learn that they hired on at the plant because they needed work. Their mothers were widowed or incapacitated, and at the end of the Depression their families were much in need of the money. Where domestic labour paid \$10 a month, factory work could bring in \$20 a week. They tell us also that the women were dedicated to their work. They never missed a shift. They followed the progress of the war and took pride in their contribution to the war effort. They were better welders than the men, but the men got better wages, even those who were trained by women. At quitting time men insisted on punching out first. There were

<sup>15</sup>Yvonne Mathews-Klein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board films of the 1940s and 1950s," *Atlantis*, 4:2 (Spring 1979), 20-33.

<sup>16</sup>Ruth Roach Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War* (Ottawa 1983), 27.

<sup>17</sup>A recent article gives a peak work force of 6,760, of whom 2,707 were women. See Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "'Beauty and the Helldivers': Representing Women's Work and Identities in a Warplant Newspaper," *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 72.

romances, but you lost your job if you got married — or you kept it quiet. Unlike the men, the women were under the supervision of *matrons who served as nurses, nannies, and cops*. The women interviewed, who all appear to have been local residents, expressed considerable sympathy for the young women recruited from across the Prairies and housed in barracks at the plant site. One of the most memorable documents in the film is a still photograph showing several of these women holding up a “We Want Work” sign at the end of the war. It was not to be. By August 1945 there were only three women on the shop floor, all that remained of a work force of almost 3,000. Were unions relevant in any way to this experience? There is no indication in the film as to whether workers at *Canadian Car and Foundry* were, at any time during the war, represented by a union, and what contribution to the advancement of women’s concerns that union made or might have made.

The story of Elsie MacGill runs like a refrain throughout this film. The first woman to graduate with an engineering degree in Canada, MacGill went on to study aeronautical engineering in the United States and then worked in the industry in Montréal; she was hired by Canadian Car and Foundry as chief aeronautical engineer and at Fort William supervised plans for production of Hurricane fighters for the RAF and subsequently for the Helldivers for the USAF. The daughter of a first-generation feminist (Helen Gregory MacGill), Elsie MacGill herself later served on the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (where she was likely responsible for ensuring that so many of the recommendations were directed towards issues of educational opportunity and economic citizenship). During her time at the plant (she was dismissed in 1943 for what is shown as a combination of professional and personal reasons), MacGill was respected by the women workers for her achievements but it is also clear that there was no special relationship between this formidable woman professional and the workers on the shop floor. There was even some resentment of the recognition she was receiving, for MacGill was celebrated in the media — and even in a comic book — as “Queen of the Hurricanes.” As one of the women notes, reporters “couldn’t see anybody but Elsie.” The film would obviously be different without MacGill, but the tensions are solved by keeping the working-class women at the centre of the story.

Does this story confirm the pessimistic conclusion that the participation of women was ideologically constructed as an exceptional wartime experience and had little later impact? Did the war “do wonders for women’s liberation,” as some contemporaries and writers assumed? Or was the war at the very least a “window on the future” that helps explain the long-run increase in women’s employment in subsequent decades? Although the documentary tradition as practised by Grierson in wartime left few open questions at the end of a film, in *Rosies of the North* the answers seem less certain. In the end, the film provides a good deal of evidence and leaves it up to the viewers to formulate their own questions about the significance of the story. In the context of a classroom discussion, this is not a difficulty.

*Take Five: 1919 and All That*

The year 1919 is the most famous year in Canadian labour history, and the Winnipeg General Strike is the one event in Canadian labour history that might be considered part of the general knowledge of educated Canadians. Was Winnipeg unique? Probably, in the sense that all historical events are unique. But the recent historiography has drawn attention to the larger pattern of events, pointing out that in 1919 there were more workers on strike in Ontario and Québec than there were in Western Canada. From the historical point of view the events of that one year can be seen as part of a longer cycle of labour unrest that occurred across the country, running from the middle of World War I to the middle of the 1920s and resulting in a series of significant defeats and a variety of adjustments to the apparent stability of the capitalist system.<sup>18</sup>

In Canadian film history, 1919 was also notable as the year of *The Great Shadow*, a film supported by the CPR and other major employers as part of an effort to combat the influence of "Bolshevism" on organized labour. With British actor Tyrone Power in the starring role, the film was shot principally at studios in Trenton, Ontario; and when scenes were shot at the Vickers factory in Montréal union members were recruited to serve as unpaid extras. *The Great Shadow* reached the movie screens in late 1919 and 1920. It received a favourable response from the daily press; in *Saturday Night* Hector Charlesworth compared it to *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.<sup>19</sup> No copies of this film have survived, but another "red scare" film released a few months earlier, *Dangerous Hours*, seems to be a close cousin and tells much the same cautionary tale. The all-American university graduate John King has a natural instinct for interfering in social conflicts on behalf of the underdog. As a result he is rapidly seduced into the cause of class struggle and violent revolution, characterized by a "New Woman" by the name of Sophia Guerni and a Bolshevik agitator by the name of Boris Blotchi. Their intentions are conveyed in flashbacks to scenes of the Russian Revolution that include the destruction of churches and the "nationalization of women." There are also a couple of unsavoury labour agitators and disreputable labour bureaucrats in evidence, who use the opportunity of a national steel strike to engage in blackmail and extortion. Soon enough, John sees the light. The outcome is not in doubt. After all, the proprietor of the shipyard turns out to be a young woman who is John's childhood sweetheart.

Winnipeg does remain controversial, as indicated in the responses, published in this journal, to a recent History Television documentary on the strike.<sup>20</sup> Written

<sup>18</sup>Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto 1998).

<sup>19</sup>Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 67-70.

<sup>20</sup>"History Television and the General Strike: Three Views," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 255-70. This includes comments by David Bercuson, Kurt Korneski, and James Naylor and Tom Mitchell.

and directed by film-maker Audrey Mehler (based on an idea presented to her by historian David Bercuson), *Prairie Fire: The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919* featured a strong narrative line identifying the principal stages in the strike story and a good mix of sources, including photographic images and interviews with eyewitnesses and historians. The voice-over narrative may have been marred by a certain amount of hyperbole ("never again in the 20th century would Canadian workers stand so steadfast for their beliefs") and one major gaffe ("The *Canadian Cooperative Federation*"). The main criticism of the film voiced by the specialist critics was that the film gave little indication of the relatively rich and diverse body of historical writing on the strike. Of course, films have no footnote references, and this lack of interest in historiography seems to be one of the characteristics of history on film as it has been practised. Because documentary films like to rely on the authority effect of "History," historians themselves are rarely shown disagreeing with what is in the film or with each other. In his own comments on *Prairie Fire*, Bercuson (author of one of the standard treatments of the strike and credited as "creative consultant" for the film) agrees that a film of this kind cannot be expected to do full justice to the subject: "What those viewers saw was, no doubt, much more superficial a treatment of the strike than what they may read in *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, or in the dozen or so serious treatments of the strike written by others of different ideological perspectives. But so what? At least the 100,000 plus viewers now know something about the strike and if their curiosity is aroused, they can easily seek out more substantial reading matter on the subject."<sup>21</sup> In the right context, of course, a television film series under a title such as "History on Film" could be followed with on-air discussions of the historical and intellectual context of the film treatment. Better still, there could be more and different kinds of films based on this and other strikes. It is interesting that there are at least half a dozen plays and novels placed in and around the events of the Winnipeg General Strike, but none of these has yet made its way onto the screen.

A second famous episode in Canadian labour history is attractively presented in *On to Ottawa* (1992), directed by Sara Diamond.<sup>22</sup> This film originated in a different kind of cultural production, a lively historical stage performance featuring song and story presented by veterans of the Great Depression as well as contempo-

<sup>21</sup>Bercuson, "Prairie Fire: A Personal View," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 257.

<sup>22</sup>Sara Diamond has also produced several films on the history of working women in British Columbia. These include *Keeping the Home Fires Burning* (1988), *Ten Dollars or Nothing!* (1989), and *The Lull Before the Storm* (1990). The latter is an ambitious four-part film consisting of two short documentaries and two full-length dramas. According to the catalogue for a National Gallery of Canada exhibition devoted to Diamond's work as a visual artist, the dramas, entitled *The Forties* and *The Fifties*, follow the fortunes of a working-class family through the decades of war and reconstruction and "centre on the changing definitions of femininity and how these changes affect family and working life," Jean Gagnon and Karen Knights, *Sara Diamond: Memories Revisited, History Retold* (Ottawa 1992), 74.

rary musicians. Besides relying on this theatrical setting, those who made the film combed the film archives with care in order to produce a detailed visual context for the film. In addition, several re-enactments introduce themes or tell stories not otherwise available in the visual archives. It is also notable that there is original historical detail in this film, not previously presented in print, on such themes as the treatment of Chinese and Japanese workers and aboriginal people who were denied relief in British Columbia. In due course, episodes of community mobilization and agitation among the relief camp workers lead on to the mobilization that produced the trek itself, but not until we are half-way through this one-hour film. The film reaches its predictable climax with the arrival of the trekkers in Regina, their uncertainty about whether to advance on to Ottawa and the police riot that ended the Trek. The mix of approaches in this film is invigorating, as the film regularly cuts away to the band and, to introduce the themes and maintain a narrative focus, the group of three veterans, Robert Jackson, Ray Wainwright, and Jean Sheils (the daughter of trek organizer Arthur 'Slim' Evans). What message do they deliver? Says Robert Jackson, addressing himself to a younger generation: "There's no shame in being unemployed, but if you don't fight back and organize — that would be a shame." In all, this is a most appealing film treatment that benefits greatly from the numerous forms of collaboration that went into its creation.

Another key moment in Canadian labour history, the unrest at the end of World War II, is presented in *Defying the Law* (1997), an account of the 1946 strike at the Steel Company of Canada plant in Hamilton, Ontario. This was a crucial time in post-war reconstruction, as Canadians remained uncertain whether wartime concessions to workers would translate into permanent rights in peacetime. If there was no general strike similar to that in Winnipeg, it was largely because strikes such as the Hamilton one were successful in meeting their objectives. The specific issues at stake — wage increases, paid vacations, union security — were less important than what the strike represented in terms of the changing balance of power in industrial Canada. The strike wave that engulfed the country in 1946 and 1947 was about staking out workers' claims to an enhanced status in the post-war world. The fact that the Hamilton strike was actually illegal when it started in July 1946 (the government had placed the plant under government control only days earlier and strikers were threatened with fines and jail terms) did not seem to be of great importance to the strikers, although in retrospect we can see that the strike revolved around the issue of industrial legality as the formula for post-war labour peace. The work force at Stelco was divided over support for the union, and one prominent theme in this film treatment is the role of the strikebreakers who remained inside the plant, where they earned triple pay for their 24-hour shifts. Access to the plant became a key issue in the strike, and the strength of the picket line enabled workers to prevent shipments or supplies from entering or leaving. Another issue was the role of the municipal government, headed by the labour mayor Sam Lawrence, who refused to call in the provincial police or the RCMP to maintain their version of law

and order at the plant gates. The solidarity of workers at other industrial plants is also important to the story, and it appears that if Canada was going to have a general strike in 1946, Hamilton was likely to be the centre of it. The film is strong on visual evidence drawn from photographic and film collections —including early colour footage of the strikebreakers playing ball and running races inside the plant. It also rests on substantial background research from the archives, which include extracts from the Prime Minister's diary in which he meditates on his strategy for ending the strike and correspondence from a subdued C.D. Howe warning that the political fallout from the Winnipeg General Strike had produced too many unnecessary labour Members of Parliament. Unfortunately, the only filmed interview is with the film producer Richard Nielsen, who in 1946 was a returned veteran and striking steelworker, and we do not meet other workers and their families telling their own stories firsthand; the voice-over statements read by actors seem pale by comparison. In the end the strike was won, and all workers, scabs and strikers alike, benefited from the gains. Moreover, according to a statement by union leader Charlie Millard (apparently from an older film or television interview), the corporation was assured that the steel industry was not an immediate target for a socialistic takeover under any potential CCF government. Every strike takes its own shape, and this film conveys the particular drama of Hamilton in vivid ways. At the same time it never fails to remind viewers of the larger issues of union security at stake. The same message might be presented in accounts of a dozen other local struggles of the time, but there is no denying the significance of the Hamilton strike.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Take Six: Cinéma Québécois*

In Québec the observer may have the impression that the labour film has a long history. This is probably a misapprehension. It is certainly true that the unique evolution of cinema in Québec has favoured a "refusal of Hollywood" and has privileged the documentary approach, even in the making of feature films. Language has provided a natural form of protectionism. So did the legislative exclusion of children from the movie theatres during the golden age of Hollywood (due to a disastrous moviehouse fire in Montréal in 1927). A distinct Québec film culture did emerge in the years prior to the Quiet Revolution, but the labour film itself is probably best regarded as part of the rebellion against the prevailing cultural and ideological limitations of that era. One contributing factor was the relocation of the National Film Board from Ottawa to Montréal in the 1950s, which provided creative opportunities for a generation of talented film-makers. At the same time,

<sup>23</sup> A similar moment in the battle for union rights, in this case in the public sector, is presented in the film *Memory and Muscle: The Postal Strike of 1965* (1995), a lively presentation relying on newsreel footage and retrospective interviews with the local rank and file leaders who led that struggle. A hopeful sign of the interest of organized labour in documenting its own history, this film was produced and directed by Michael Ostroff for the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

the use of portable sound equipment stimulated the growth of the *cinéma direct* techniques that captured the language as well as the images of modern Québec during a time of social change and cultural reorientation.<sup>24</sup>

Among the most important documentaries of the Quiet Revolution were portraits of working-class life in films such as Clément Perron's *Jour après Jour* (1962) and Arthur Lamothe's *Buchérons de la Manouane* (1962). The most controversial was Denys Arcand's *On est au coton* (1970), which ran into official disapproval at the NFB and contributed to Arcand's transition from the documentary to the fictional film. In the making of feature films, traces of the documentary tradition remain visible. Claude Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971) provides a social portrait of the asbestos mining country on the eve of the Quiet Revolution, making it not only a study of adolescence but also a portrait of the awakening of a society. A viewing of Jean Beaudin's *J.A. Martin Photographe* (1977), which focuses primarily on the relationship between a rural photographer and his long-suffering wife, is also rewarded along the way with glimpses of working-class life in 19th-century rural Québec, such as a visit to a small sawmill employing numerous children. Similarly, the feature film *La Sarrasine* (1992), based on the true story of a crime that occurred in Montréal, recreates the world of Italian working-class immigrants in the early 20th-century city.

Most recently, in 1999 there was the popular téléroman broadcast by Radio-Canada under the title *Chartrand et Simonne*. This is a well-scripted, well-acted dramatic series based on the life of Michel Chartrand and Simonne Monet as they battled their way through the personal and political struggles of the 1950s and the Quiet Revolution. We watch them move back and forth between the tensions of family life in a labour organizer's household and famous moments in Québec labour history such as the strikes at Dupuis Frères and Murdochville. From this evidence, it appears that the labour film may be alive and well in Québec. Will audiences beyond French Canada ever see this series in subtitled or dubbed versions, or is it assumed that this kind of labour-oriented family saga has a limited appeal?

Meanwhile, the documentary tradition has also continued to produce contributions to the genre of the labour film. One fascinating example is the feature-length documentary by Richard Boutet and Pascal Gélinas, *La Turlutte des années dures* (1983). Like *On to Ottawa*, this film also attempts to break with conventional structures of documentary film-making. This wide-ranging, episodic treatment of the Great Depression has been described as a "documentary musical tragedy." In the tradition of the *cinéma direct*, the film gives voice to a working-class narrative, and it displays a rich visual portrait of the decade, all of which is energized by the

<sup>24</sup>For some background, see Paul Warren, "The French-Canadian Cinema: A Hyphen Between Documentary and Fiction" and Philip Reines, "The Emergence of Quebec Cinema: A Historical Overview," in Joseph. I. Donohoc, Jr., ed., *Essays on Quebec Cinema* (East Lansing 1991). A dramatic feature by Bernard Develin, *Alfred J.* (1956) is identified by Donohoc as a film that "describes the union movement in a working-class setting." (174)



songs known as "turluttes." The technical achievements of the film in creating a visual archive and capturing the unique folk music of the streets earned this film a major award. At the same time the political engagement of the film-makers is also obvious, as the film does not pretend to treat the era with the authority of retrospective objectivity and insists on making direct links between the past of the 1930s and the present of the 1980s.<sup>25</sup>

Another remarkable feature-length documentary is Sophie Bissonnette's treatment of the life and times of Léa Roback, *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991). This is an exceptional visual document of a labour activist, anti-fascist, and feminist who grew up with the 20th century. Born in 1903 at Beauport, Québec, the daughter of Jewish Eastern European immigrants, she moved easily in both francophone and anglophone *milieus*, learning first hand about the shape of anti-semitism in Québec and the exploitation of workers, especially young women. A sense of adventure and possibility brought her to urban Montréal in 1919, where she was soon immersed in new worlds, including detours to New York and Berlin, that led her to become a union organizer in the garment and munitions industries and, politically, a Communist. With the participation of Roback herself and her friends young and old, the story is told in all its visual and emotional complexity. One comes away from this film with an understanding of the spirited sense of social responsibility that animated activists such as Roback and the unfailing humour and "gros bon sens" that made her so effective as an organizer. Equally impressive are the preparation and care that have gone into this production. We are reminded that documentary films need not be simple translations of well-established historical material but that they have the capacity to seek out new sources and new information, most notably in the areas of oral testimony and visual evidence. Most recently, Bissonnette has applied her skills to a film about the best known labour struggle in Québec, the Asbestos Strike of 1949.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Take Seven: More Features*

The long hiatus in feature film production in English Canada lasted with little significant interruption from the end of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1970s, when the cultural nationalism of the times established tax incentives and funding opportunities to encourage film-making in Canada. Much of the new activity failed to address Canadian themes at all and amounted to little more than an effort to emulate Hollywood standards. But among those film-makers who did focus on

<sup>25</sup>"La Turlute[sic] des années dures," *Cinema Canada* (May 1984), 18-20.

<sup>26</sup>Bissonnette's earlier work includes *A Wives' Tale* (1981) and "Quel numéro? What number?" *Or the Electronic Workshop* (1985), both of which were made as contemporary social and political statements but can now be viewed as historical treatments as well. See Himani Bannerji, "Sophie Bissonnette and Her Films," *Fuse* (February-March 1986), 25-7. For a discussion of films on the Asbestos Strike, see Georges Massé, "Des images de la grève de l'amiante," *Bulletin du RCHTQ*, 70 (automne 1999), 54-61.

Canadian stories, the documentary tradition remained a strong influence on the selection of themes and on the treatment of subjects.

The classic example is Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), a film that is more tragic than comic in its account of the misadventures of two likeable Maritimers who set out to seek their fortune in the big city at the end of the 1960s. They leave behind a broken landscape of abandoned mines and boats and arrive ready to work and prosper in the office towers of Toronto. It does not take long for them to discover that working-class life in the big city presents its own challenges and they make their troubled adjustments to these reduced expectations. The best work they can locate is in the warehouse of a bottling plant, which has its own thresholds of frustration and alienation — as we learn when Pete sits Joey down to calculate and discuss the number of bottles they have moved through the plant in the course of their work. It is a moment of revelation for both characters. Peter Harcourt has captured the sensibility of the film thoughtfully in a comment originally published in *Cinema Canada* in 1976: "Pete and Joey are pals, real comrades in the way that Shebib believes in; but they are also very different guys. While they are both typical members of the 'lumpenproletariat' — unskilled workers with no sense of the political implications of the role society has assigned them — Pete has a more reflective nature. He tries to think about things. Clumsy though his articulations may be (for language, among other things, is the property of the middle-classes), he is doubly aware that life for other people offers something more, something which he wants access to."<sup>27</sup> A generation later, the most memorable scenes in this film still ring true, and this classic film can be expected to receive renewed attention now that it is available on video.

There are more glimpses of working-class life in dozens of feature films produced in this period. A viewing of a popular film such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974) shows passing scenes of neighbourhood and workplace life in Montréal in the 1940s, although, like the novel on which it was based, the film is primarily about characters who wanted to get out of the working class. By contrast, *John and the Missus* (1987), based on a novel by Gordon Pinsent and starring the actor as a hardrock miner, was about a character who embraced his class identity and resisted attempts to restructure his social environment through a state-sponsored resettlement programme in Newfoundland in the 1960s. Similarly, *Bye Bye Blues* (1989) is not only the entertaining story of a female singer and piano player but also a perceptive account of the opportunities and frustrations available to a single woman who is seeking to make a living in the rural west during World War II. *Why Shoot the Teacher?* (1977) is an appealing memory film about a young man from Toronto teaching in Saskatchewan during the Great Depression and learning something about the place and the people. And while *My American Cousin* (1986) is mainly about growing up young and female in rural British Columbia in

<sup>27</sup>Peter Harcourt, "Men of Vision: Some Comments on the Work of Don Shebib," in Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson, eds., *Canadian Film Reader* (Toronto 1977), 211.

the 1950s, it is also possible in watching this film to reflect on the shape of the household economy in the Okanagan fruit orchards and, for a few moments, the role of itinerant pickers who help bring in the harvest.

More recently, several features, made primarily for non-theatrical audiences, have addressed themes closer to the traditional focus of labour history. One of the most effective of these is *Canada's Sweetheart*, the treatment of the degradation of labour relations on the waterfront from the time of the CSU strike in 1949 to the investigations of the Norris Commission in 1962. At the centre of the story is the unlovely Hal Banks, memorably acted by Maury Chaykin, and the supporting cast is equally strong. While Banks comes across as a pathological villain, the film does not shrink from identifying the complicity of employers and governments in plotting the downfall of the CSU and accepting Banks and his notorious "Do Not Ship" list. Even the labour establishment is slow to respond and is unwilling to curtail Banks until he finally goes too far in challenging existing union jurisdictions. Similarly, *Net Worth* (1995) presents another unsavoury episode in the history of labour relations in the 1950s, in this case in the context of the National Hockey League. The action revolves around the talent-laden Canadian staff of the Detroit Red Wings of the mid-1950s as the hockey players make their first feeble efforts to stand up to the NHL owners. The film shows how the hockey heroes of the time were treated as shabbily as any low-paid blue collar employee, perhaps worse, as they were repeatedly reminded how lucky they were to be paid for something that was "just a game." Especially in the characters of the young Gordie Howe and the veteran Ted Lindsay, one gets a feeling for the complexity of emotions among these workers as they struggle with issues of deference, resistance, and solidarity.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Take Eight: Germinal?*

And what of the coal miners, who do figure prominently in labour films in advanced industrial states such as Britain and the United States, where the coal industry sits close to the cultural imagination and political economy of the country? In Britain a group of remarkable dramatic films in the late 1930s brought images of the coal

<sup>28</sup>Not all efforts at historical drama based on the workplace experience have been equally successful. One instructive failure was the well-acted and thoughtful film *Lyddie* (1996), based on an excellent juvenile novel of the same title by Katherine Paterson. While the novel was situated in the cotton mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, in the 1850s and explored the relationships between young women workers in that setting, for the purposes of the film the story was improbably transposed to Cornwall, Ontario — a generation before the textile industry reached the town. Meanwhile, one of the women finishes the film by deciding to go to university — another premature option at the time. Another short effort to portray the early industrial experience in dramatic terms was the NFB production *Chandler's Mill* (1991), which also introduced historical anomalies and anachronistic expectations. I have discussed this film briefly in "One Hundred Years After: Film and History in Atlantic Canada," *Acadiensis*, xxvi, 2 (Spring 1997), 122-3.

industry and class conflict to national attention — *The Citadel*, *The Stars Look Down*, *Proud Valley*. These were films that could be broadly defined as social problem films, and to a greater or lesser degree they implied solutions based on class solidarity and socialist politics. Even in Hollywood there were coal mining films, notably *Black Fury* and *How Green Was My Valley*, although the messages were somewhat less positive as far as labour unions were concerned.<sup>29</sup> More recently, productions such as Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and John Sayles's *Matewan* have set a much different standard. In the Canadian case, setting aside for the time being the matter of documentaries such as the wartime mobilization film *Coal Face Canada* (1943) and the attempt at local labour history in *12,000 Men* (1978), the coal miners have remained largely in the shadows.

In the case of *The Bay Boy* (1984), a well-received coming-of-age film set in the coal town of Glace Bay in 1937, the predominant working-class population is almost invisible. This is in part explained by the class position of the family at the centre of the story. The father is a local soft-drink manufacturer who is trying to rebuild his failed business in the basement of their home; the mother, an immigrant war bride, keeps the family economy going by baking for local restaurants and taking in boarders. In one of the few references to coal miners, the mother (Liv Ullman) comments briefly on the status of the coal miners, who are perceived as the least fortunate members of the community: "I am glad your father isn't a miner. The worst job for the poorest wages. Having to live in those company houses, shop at the company store." The conversation, misleadingly, goes on to lament the influence of the company stores — which had closed permanently a dozen years earlier, at the time of the 1925 strike. For Donald Campbell (played by Kiefer Sutherland) this is a time in his life when he must reach decisions about his future, and in the course of the action in the film it becomes clear to him that the surrounding environment is a negative one and that the only option for him is to effect his escape from "this mining town at the edge of the earth." From such a film it would be difficult to know that Glace Bay was coming out of the Great Depression with one of the country's strongest local unions and social reform movements and about to elect the first CCF MP east of Manitoba. In dramatic terms, *The Bay Boy* works well and addresses several difficult themes, but although it is based on director Daniel Petrie's personal memories of growing up in the Bay, it is too narrowly focused to serve as a portrait of the life of the coal country in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

Some similar reservations apply to *Margaret's Museum* (1995), a very successful feature film whose action also takes place in Glace Bay, in this case a decade

<sup>29</sup>See Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London 1989), Chapter 5; Francis R. Walsh, "The Films We Never Saw: American Movies View Organized Labour, 1934-1954," *Labor History*, 27 (1986), 564-80.

<sup>30</sup>My thanks to Mark Van Horn for sharing insights from his research on this film. See Mark Van Horn, "A Tale of Two Films: A Reading of *Johnny Belinda* (1948) and *The Bay Boy* (1984)," MA Report, University of New Brunswick, 2000.

later. Here the coal miners and their families appear to be much closer to the centre of the story, as the main character is a young woman (Margaret, played by Helena Bonham Carter) who has already lost her father to the coal mines and is watching her grandfather waste away; she is determined to do what she can to protect her brother Jimmy and her husband Neil from the same fate. In Sheldon Currie's original stories, which provided the basis for the film, Margaret's brother Jimmy is an articulate advocate of labour organization and political action. However, the labour theme virtually disappears in the translation from the page to the screen, thus providing a misleading impression of the balance of class forces in the mining community and the choices available to the local population. Again, in this film there recurs the persistent illusion of the company store, that powerful symbol of company domination, long after its actual historical demise. The explanation appears to be that the film subscribes to a view of mining communities as unchanging places exempt from history. Accordingly, the sensibilities of the 1990s can be applied to the social relations of the 1890s and the physical landscape of the 1940s without interrupting the static essentialism of local history. *Margaret's Museum* is in many respects a well-crafted and moving production, but it is essentially a romantic tragedy rather than an historical film.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Take Nine: Final Cut*

In the end, it should come as no surprise that the Great Canadian Labour Film does not exist. There are only short takes, many of them arising from incidental processes of documentation and fictionalization. There is also a more purposeful body of work, but its promise has remained contingent on circumstances of patronage and funding and the contending priorities of other projects. The virtual absence of labour history from the sample version of Canadian history contained in the *Heritage Minutes*, for instance, suggests the difficulties in gaining access to the cultural apparatus that governs the Canadian discourse. And it still remains to be seen how labour and working-class history themes will be integrated into the CBC/Radio-Canada production of the ambitious multi-part visual history, *Canada: A People's History*, to be released on television during the 2000 and 2001 seasons. Will it be possible to reconcile the traditional narratives of state-formation with the history of the working-class experience in this country? Or is it more likely that labour films will arise out of different kinds of sponsorships and partnerships? Do the imperatives of film and television production lead naturally towards reductionist, homogenized treatments of history? Are more creative approaches possible in

<sup>31</sup>For my earlier critique, see "The Social Landscape of Margaret's Museum," *Canadian Dimension* (July-August 1998), 41-3 and comments in "One Hundred Years After," 132-5. For additional commentaries on the film, see Noreen Golfman, "Mining: Margaret's Museum," *Canadian Forum* (April 1996), 28-31 and Peter Urquhart, "The Glace Bay Miners' Museum/Margaret's Museum: Adaptation and Resistance," *Cinéaction*, 49 (1999), 12-18.

making history films? Readers of this journal are likely to recognize the relevance of these challenges, as a concern with public history has been a regular feature in these pages. Whether there is a master narrative or a multiple one to be told, there certainly are stories. After all, there is an enormous accumulation of cultural energy stored in the back volumes of our publications and the recesses of our imaginations over the quarter-century since the emergence of labour and working-class history as a field of research. Sooner or later it will be time for these stories to be shown on film.

It is a Sunday morning. The sun is streaming in through the windows. The professor is ironing shirts and listening to the radio and thinking about his overdue assignment for *Labour/Le Travail*. Meanwhile, Natalie Zemon Davis is explaining to the radio host Michael Enright how historians look at films. She is explaining that history is about getting things right, and by this she means not just the materiality of the situation but also the meaning of the times. History is not just about the collection of information, she explains, much as generations of history teachers have patiently instructed their students; it is also about the patterns of meaning in human experience. The same applies to films, or should apply. But we must always keep reminding ourselves that films are not just like books. They speak a different language, and here Natalie is agreeing with Robert Roscnstone, who says that historians who want to think about films need to learn how to think in pictures. At the same time, he adds, film-makers have something to learn about thinking historically.<sup>32</sup> It is hard to avoid concluding that visual history will benefit from greater collaboration between historians and film-makers. We do need to learn from each other. As in all stories, there is a need for dialogue.

<sup>32</sup>Davis was summarizing the themes of her Barbara Frum Lecture at the University of Toronto, published as Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Toronto 2000). See also Robert Roscnstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge 1995).