

## **Views from Off-Centre: The Cultural Work of Film and Television Studies in Canada**

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## REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

### Views from Off-Centre: The Cultural Work of Film and Television Studies in Canada

THERE ARE SOME FAIRLY OBVIOUS LINKAGES between three recent titles in film and television studies in Canada, particularly in terms of how each contributes to unpacking conventional representations of marginalized people and places onscreen. Malek Khouri's monograph, *Filming Politics: Communism and the Portrayal of the Working Class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-46* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), and Darrell Varga's edited collection, *Rain/Drizzle/Fog: Film and Television in Atlantic Canada* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2010), are the first two books published under the University of Calgary Press's new "Cinemas Off Centre Series," of which Khouri is formerly the general editor and Varga the current series editor.<sup>1</sup> Jerry White's *The Radio Eye: Cinema in the North Atlantic, 1958-1988* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009) would also have been a good candidate for this series based on its goal to uncover bodies of screen work that are outliers in dominant treatments of film and television studies, particularly those that address the Canadian context. Both Khouri's book and Varga's book certainly examine such bodies of work, as does White's in the form of media projects produced in and around Charlevoix's Île-aux-Coudres, Newfoundland's Fogo Island, the Faroe Islands, and Ireland's Gaeltacht regions.

Khouri's monograph looks at the first seven years of the National Film Board (NFB), between 1939 and 1946, through the lens of filmic representations of labour. He does so by focusing on a corpus of films categorized under the NFB's *Work and Labour Relations* catalogue listing and tying these productions to the political discourse of the Communist Party of Canada at this time. Khouri and White also contribute chapters to Varga's anthology, which is the first scholarly treatment of screen media in Atlantic Canada and brings together a number of disciplinary perspectives on the subject, with Khouri's examining Gordon Pinsent's film *John and the Missus* (1987) and White's the NFB's Newfoundland Project (1967-69). Less obvious than such connections between these authors, though, are the ways in which each of their books actualizes an established convention in the field of cultural studies, demonstrating that cultural formations and policies are themselves producers of – and not merely reflections of – political, economic, and social life. These three books thereby present views from off centre that will be of interest to historians, film and television scholars, and specialists in communications and media studies, particularly those seeking to move beyond the still-dominant national/ist framework of film and television studies in Canada – one that risks locating cultural production exclusively as the domain of the state's social and intellectual elites.

1 Khouri and Varga are also the co-editors of *Working on Screen: Representations of the Working Class in Canadian Cinema* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2006), a collection that examines representations of socio-economic class in film, video, and television production in Canada.

In its analysis of the NFB's creation, circulation, and promotion of films dedicated to a political discourse of labour, Malek Khouri's *Filming Politics* makes a notable departure from previous studies of the NFB (which often focus on the board's role as a contested producer of national/ist narratives through the documentary form).<sup>2</sup> In the first chapter Khouri moves away from the tendency within English Canadian cinema historiography to focus on the NFB as a cultural producer of influence in terms of national/ist identity, suggesting that such arguments "tend to neutralize the varied political and cultural dynamics that were part of the process of shaping Canadian hegemony" (37). Khouri tries to fill this scholarly gap by focusing on the role of the NFB's founding filmmakers throughout this chapter, whose oppositional (or, at least, left of centre) politics informed "the ideological and practical parameters of the work of the NFB during this period" (37). Khouri's book thereby differs from exercises that address the NFB's role in producing national/ist cinema, framing instead the NFB's formational period in relation to ways in which both filmmakers and the Communist Part of Canada (CPC) conceptualized labour as a cultural practice during the Second World War.

After setting up the broader contexts of "pre-NFB Canadian cinematic discourse" in the second chapter and "Communist-based working class cultural practices of the 1920s and 1930s in the third" (18), Khouri argues in the fourth chapter that the NFB's foundational politics and early film work actually constituted a counter-hegemonic historical bloc, in Gramsci's sense, through its treatment of workers' rights, unemployment, women's labour, and support for communism. This oppositional and/or left-leaning film production, he suggests, was both influenced by and operated in tandem with the strategies of the CPC before, during, and immediately following the war. Khouri demonstrates this by examining the efforts of the early NFB filmmakers, under founding director John Grierson, to circulate their products to rural and working class audiences throughout the country. Films were screened in community venues such as schools and village halls and were followed by public discussions, which allowed the viewing audience to debate the topics addressed onscreen. Since the films' themes included "underemployment, recreational programs, rehabilitation, industrial development, labour safety, labour-management coordination, and international relations," Khouri notes that these discussions often bolstered the goals of farm and community organizers in their grassroots political work (98). With a circuit of 43 rural communities by 1942 and monthly viewing

2 Much like standard investigations of such dominant central Canadian cultural institutions as the National Gallery of Canada and the Canada Council for the Arts, historical treatments of the NFB generally surround its role as a cultural producer of romanticized, national/ist ideology. See, for example, such major contributions to this literature as Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Blaine Allen, "A National 'As Distinct from Departmental' Film Board, and the Case of Heritage," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 30-54; Christopher Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema: Ideology, Difference and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); and Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). For an examination of the role of film in producing national/ist narratives in the period preceding the NFB's formation in 1939, see Charles Acland, "National Dreams, International Encounters: The Formation of Canadian Film Culture in the 1930s," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 3-26.

audiences of up to a quarter of a million people, most of them from working-class backgrounds, Khouri suggests that the early NFB tours resulted in supporting collective organizing that was already in line with the CPC's policy of the Popular Front: "The ultimate goal . . . was to spur people to group activity and action in their dealing with the issues discussed in the films" (99).<sup>3</sup>

In assessing the relationship between the CPC and the NFB, Khouri insists that his book gives "the reader an opportunity to sample first-hand accounts of the CPC's discourse during this critical period of its and the NFB's history. Considering that the book focuses on the interactivity between two discourses, that of the party (and its Popular Front policy) and that of the NFB films, it makes sense to rely on first-hand sources from both discourses in order to draw meaningful conclusions about possible connections" (17). To be sure, though, this book's most valuable contribution lies in its analysis of the NFB's discourse in relation to the CPC's and not the other way around. Nevertheless, Khouri's commitment to examining the NFB's corpus of labour films at this time, in ways that address both the historical context of their production, distribution, and reception as well as the interaction of a politically organized left with NFB filmmakers, is admirable. In chapters 5 through 7, for example, Khouri offers close readings of most of the working class and labour films produced between 1939 and 1946, which constitute the majority of his primary source evidence for the book (while also providing a useful annotated list of each title in an appendix). As in the rest of the volume, these chapters supplement film analysis with archival source materials such as political newspapers and trade union pamphlets. Read together, these chapters' combination of textual and visual film analysis with an investigation of period writings associated with organized labour in Canada frame the early NFB as engaging with the struggle against wartime fascism through the defense of liberal democracy. In this, Khouri's research suggests a potential relationship between the left-leaning ideals of NFB filmmakers and the tenets of liberal internationalism, which Zoë Druick defines as "a pacifist philosophy of tolerance and dialogue that had held sway as an alternative to both fascism and communism in many influential quarters during the 1930s."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, most NFB studies disregard the influence of the CPC, which, as Khouri argues, "was probably responsible for some of the existing gaps in Canadian film studies when it comes to acknowledging the counter-hegemonic ideological workings during this critical period of Canadian film history" (17).

Khouri's text might be critiqued for conflating the liberal internationalism of NFB filmmakers with the socialism of the CPC's Popular Front. Still, in his final two chapters, Khouri builds his strongest case that "NFB films [added] to the evolvement of working-class cultural practices in the early twentieth century" (173). In particular, Chapter 8 outlines the importance of Grierson's early NFB aesthetic vision and the ways in which the films "informed and were informed (this time stylistically) by left-oriented discourse of the time" (173). This chapter provides substantial evidence of

3 For an explanation of this shift in CPC ideology, in which the party built multiparty democratic alliances with constituencies it once denounced as fascist, see Ian McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 157-83.

4 Zoë Druick, "International Cultural Relations as a Factor in Postwar Canadian Cultural Policy: The Relevance of UNESCO for the Massey Commission," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 1 (2006): 179.

the NFB's use of documentary to "depict genuine settings of working people in Canada: their communities, their workplaces, their union halls, their houses, the products of their labour, etc." (179). Despite Grierson's insistence that the documentary form was "an anti-aesthetic movement" (178), Khouri convincingly demonstrates the ways in which "the cinematic camera as well as montage editing approaches were utilized by NFB filmmakers as interventionists rudiments into 'raw realities'" (179). Such nuanced readings of the interface between the discourses of institutionalized cinema and organized labour, at an imperative moment in the development of each in Canada, combined with an analysis of the ways in which the NFB produced politics rather than merely documented them, marks this book as an important contribution indeed. As such, this book will certainly be of interest to labour historians and film scholars and, because of the accessible way in which Khouri writes, will be useful for undergraduate and graduate teaching.

Khouri's cautioned rereading of the NFB against the standard narrative of its role in building a romanticized, national/ist cultural identity in Canada offers a complement to Darrell Varga's anthology *Rain/Drizzle/Fog*. Varga's project similarly provides a critical history of screen media outside of the national/ist rubric, with an examination of film and television in Atlantic Canada that contributes greatly to filling the gap in regional media scholarship – one that will be of interest to a wide range of scholarly and student readers. Varga manages his multifarious task in ways, as he states, that navigate "the problem as well as the complex relation between the concept of national cinema and regional specificity, and the relation between film as global industry and the tricky area of cinema as art form" (xiii). In his introductory chapter, Varga argues that just as "the region and centre relation" reveals itself in disciplinary Canadian history, so too is it measured in local film and television production activity and reception (xvii). Varga, much like Khouri, suggests that such cultural products inform and generate these relationships, rather than act as mere symptoms of them. Varga's collection brings together essays that, on the whole, "seek to understand identity not as a national imaginary, but as something produced in the lived experience of place" (xii).

Moreover, this group of essays attempts to capture both the material and immaterial implications of producing culture in and around Atlantic Canada in ways that draw attention to Toby Miller's concept of the new international division of cultural labour (NICL). The NICL, which is both produced by and reproduces "an increasingly mobile middle-class culture-industry workforce," and favours "North over South and capital over labour, as film and television production, computing, and sport go global in search of locations, skills, and docile labour,"<sup>5</sup> has enormous implications for cultural production along Canada's east coast. When it comes to making films and television programs set in Atlantic Canada, as in places elsewhere susceptible to patterns of uneven geographical development,<sup>6</sup> Varga notes "the

5 Toby Miller, "Introducing . . . Cultural Citizenship," *Social Text* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 2.

6 David Harvey defines his theory of uneven geographical development as "a product of a differentiated diffusion process from the centre that leaves behind residuals from preceding eras or meets with pockets of resistance towards the progress and modernization that capitalism promotes. . . . Whole populations, cultures and territories are thereby presumed to be incapable of shaping their own history let alone influencing the developments elsewhere. Occasionally some place 'sees the light' (e.g. Japan

presence of offshore (largely American) productions shooting on location provides infrastructure, but it also provides the economic cover for the ideological determination of cinema culture and the place of cinema within the broader social and economic terrain" (xiii). Such connections between the politics of cultural production and the cultural value of labour inform the arguments made throughout this volume.

The book's first chapter, by Colin Howell and Peter Twohig, counters the pervasive concept of Atlantic Canadian regionality as resulting from geography alone, specifically by critically investigating the romanticized constructions of place as put forward by the NFB in its mandate to "interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations" (1). Herein lies the NFB's problem, as Seth Feldman has recently articulated: "It is exactly what it is mandated to be."<sup>7</sup> Yet Howell and Twohig point to an important contradiction within the NFB as institution, citing Khouri's *Filming Politics* as outlining this case in point. As much as Khouri's book shows the ways in which "there is a significant tradition within the NFB of challenging conventional understandings," in other ways the board did just the opposite: "Films dealing with Atlantic Canada tended before 1990 to reinforce antimodernist assumptions about regional backwardness and simplicity at the very time a generation of regional historians was trying to put these notions to rest" (1). Howell and Twohig thereby set up one of the primary themes of this collection, which is both to reread dominant visual representations of Atlantic Canada onscreen and to demonstrate the presence of cultural production that has historically challenged such antimodern narratives.

Tracy H. Zhang's chapter on grassroots film and video movements in Halifax is a good example of this in that it demonstrates the existence of an active and engaged independent media arts scene in the region dating back to the 1960s. Similarly, Greg Canning's examination of vaudevillian movie-going culture in Truro, Nova Scotia, at the turn of the 20th century exposes the ways in which transnational film culture coalesced with modern life outside of the metropole. As Canning points out, in Truro this happened in ways that were unique to small-town Nova Scotia as the new medium was actually more readily accepted than in larger urban centres across North America – perhaps because it combined the new moving picture shows not only with more familiar vaudeville acts but also with such stunts as a live-baby giveaway. Bruce Barber, in turn, analyses the connection between commercial filmmaker Thom Fitzgerald and his roots at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, providing a close reading of Fitzgerald's first feature, *Movie of the Week* (1990), which gives substantial insight into the art institution's role in Halifax's film and video community. Likewise, Varga's contribution to this volume examines four films that address the role of the artist as it pertains to the Atlantic Canadian context, and how this role often reveals the ways in which region is "both idea and geography while centre is both physical and about the forces of culture and capital" (254). These four contributions certainly drive home the ironic subtitle of Varga's introduction:

and more recently much of the East and Southeast Asia) and forges ahead. But the rest of the world lives in 'the waiting room of history'." See Harvey's *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006), 72.

7 Feldman makes this astute observation in his review quote located on the back cover of Zoë Druick's *Projecting Canada*. See <http://mqup.mcgill.ca/book.php?bookid=2070>.

“Nothing Ever Happens Down There” (ix). In addition, the reader gets the sense that antimodernism alone does not define screen media production in Atlantic Canada but rather that such production intersects with dynamic strategies that challenge these conventional representations.

Yet the antimodernist vision of the region is not only challenged; it is also explored in depth in this collection. Jennifer Vanderburgh and John McCullough present two very engaging analyses of the contradictions that come with representing an antimodern Atlantic Canada, highlighting the particular dimensions of this pervasive trope when it comes to local television production. Vanderburgh explores the nationally broadcast, Halifax-based CBC program *Don Messer’s Jubilee* (1959-69), demonstrating with impressive archival evidence that both the program and its subsequent cancellation exposed the ways in which “the binaries of 1960s Canadian nationalist discourse – traditionalism and modernism, rural and urban, biculture and multiculture – were perceived to be at odds, corrupting the very core of English Canada’s so-called ‘national identity’” (135). In parsing an archival collection of letters protesting the cancellation, Vanderburgh suggests that the public controversy over losing Messer’s nostalgic, antimodern musical program was “emblematic of a larger cultural slippage away from the primacy of white ‘race,’ Anglo-Saxon culture and its religions, and rural/regional working-class values, as defining features of the nation’s dominant performance of ‘identity’” (140). As a result, both Messer’s representation of regional Maritime “tradition” and the nationally articulated clinging to such “tradition” by way of the protest letters become equally transparent identity projects. McCullough picks up on similar interplay between performing antimodernism and successfully transitioning the local context by exploring the ways in which television production in Atlantic Canada can be effectively used as a resource to regionalize and globalize at the same time. In particular, McCullough points out “regionalism plays an important role in global media economies to the extent that regions provide cost benefits in terms of both labour and space” (152). McCullough’s subsequent examination of the portrayal of the Maritimes in the television programs *Gullage’s* and *Trailer Park Boys* uncovers the extent to which the local setting is still relevant when it comes to producing shows for global consumption.

Historical mappings of film production and circulation also speak to the tensions of producing locally and the effects such products have once screened outside of that local context. Pierre Véronneau adds an instructive chapter in this vein by providing a substantial overview of Acadian cinema. He reveals the obstacles that Acadian filmmakers have historically faced in getting French-language films made outside Québec, paying particular attention to the institutional project of regionalizing the NFB beginning in 1974. Véronneau also explores Acadian filmmakers’ use of antimodernism and the influence that storytelling and music have had on this mode in Acadian cinema, which, he makes clear, also “learned to move beyond folklore and the picturesque despite the fact that these diverse forces have attempted to resurrect such themes” (44). Andrew Burke employs mapping of a different sort in his reading of Andrea Dorfman’s feature *Parsley Days*, a film that charts Halifax’s north end on bicycle by breaking away from standard filmic delineations of local vernacular. Instead, Burke shows the ways in which Dorfman’s film is “grounded in a history of place” but also “breaks with strict realism, use of vernacular, and recognition that the past can be acknowledged without being wholly determining . . .” (231). Sylvia



Hamilton, in turn, maps out the sometimes very personal journey of a filmmaker by documenting her own research and creative process in the making of her film *Portia White: Think On Me* (2000). Hamilton's portrait of African Nova Scotian contralto Portia May White exposes the intersection of memory with history onscreen and the challenges of building this portrait in the face of racialized, historical absence. To address such absences, Hamilton writes:

I shadowed Portia. I walked where she walked in Halifax, to Cornwallis Street Baptist Church. I rode the train to Moncton, New Brunswick, and walked the streets of the Toronto neighbourhood where she lived and taught in her studio. I stood in the expansive field at Detroit's Briggs (formerly Tiger) Stadium where she performed, spent nights at Winnipeg's Fort Garry Hotel where she met her faithful accompanist, and later my very generous interview subject, Gordon Kushner, the venue for her last public performance (280).

Hamilton's engaging chapter thereby provides an imperative anchor for this collection in that it exposes the reader to the complexities and complications that come with making history onscreen, especially when such histories "serve as counter-memory standing in opposition to erasure" (264).

The remaining three chapters by Noreen Golfman, Malek Khouri, and Jerry White address the cultural work of film in and around Newfoundland, each paying attention to the interrelation of labour and place on and off screen. Golfman's chapter introduces the reader to the question of representational politics through the visual treatment of Newfoundland's seal hunt, the site of an ongoing battle between local hunters and animal rights activists. "But as anyone east of Quebec knows well," writes Golfman, "all of this is not about the economy, after all. It is about who has a right to speak for and produce images of a place where people live and work, about who is representing what, when, and for whom. . . . That project, like the seal hunt, is far from over" (79). Khouri investigates Gordon Pinsent's *John and the Missus*, a film that examines a fictional family's struggle with the government's real-life resettlement of outport communities to centralize the province's population during the 1950s and 1960s. This chapter sheds light on the processes of resisting modernization in Newfoundland, particularly as they are bound to and influenced by cultural production. White's chapter also provides a sneak preview of his monograph in its assessment of the NFB's "Challenge for Change" program and the specific case of Colin Low's Newfoundland Project (also known as the Fogo Island films). White reinterprets these works beyond their historical positioning "as dry exercises in community building" and instead sees them as "an aesthetically sophisticated form of non-narrative, poetic cinema" (103). In pulling at the threads of localized concerns demonstrated in this series of documentaries, White makes the point that the filmmaker's aesthetic choices actually bolster the community politics that are also the subject of these works.

White picks up this same case study in *The Radio Eye*, this time examining the Fogo Island films (Chapter 2) in relation to examples of localized media projects from elsewhere in the North Atlantic: Pierre Perrault's NFB-produced *Île-aux-Coudres*



films (Chapter 1), the development of television in the Faroe Islands (Chapter 3), and an introduction to the Irish Gaeltacht region (Chapter 4) – specifically through the cases of Irish-language writer and activist Desmond Fennell (Chapter 5), the independent video production group Cinegaeil (Chapter 6), and Irish-language television broadcasting (Chapter 7). Divided into two geographically themed sections (Part 1, “The Islands,” and Part 2, “The Gaeltacht”), White’s book argues that there are important intersections in cultural politics and cultural production between these seemingly diverse regions of the North Atlantic. To connect these examples together, White employs Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s well-known concept “the Radio Eye,” which is, in Vertov’s words, a tactic bent on “eliminating distance between people” (46). With this idea in mind, White uses his examples to demonstrate the ways in which the history of radio broadcast continues to have strong influences on filmmaking, video, and television production: “via some shared experience” (Perrault), “by way of restlessness with linearity” (the Fogo Island films), and “through the use of radio as a model” (the Faroes and the Gaeltacht) (4). In other words, White uses Vertov’s concept to suggest that radio is both a useful metaphor for reading the media projects he investigates and an important methodological tool with which to examine film and video that seeks audience interaction and intervention rather than static representation.

Moreover, White suggests that one factor each of these media cases share “is a sense of ‘in-between-ness’ that defines the politics of so much radio practice” (5). White’s investigation of Québec-based radio and television producer and filmmaker Pierre Perrault is a case in point. Perrault defined his radio and film work by the two interconnected notions of “cinéma vécu” and “cinéma de la parole” (35), concepts that White explains as informed “not only by the rhythms and inflections of spoken language, but also by the play between spontaneity and a high level of construction that defines most radio practice” (31-2). One of Perrault’s 1950s radio-cum-television series, *Au Pays de Neufve-France*, became a direct source for his later Île-aux-Coudres film work, as it featured interviews with island residents that would subsequently outline the filmmaker’s view “of the island as both linked to a traditional maritime economy and yet also marginalized and scrappy . . .” (39). In what is perhaps Perrault’s most famous film, *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), he again examines the island and opens the film sequence by narrating: “It was me, in search of a people, acted out by the mystery and directed by the prophets. . . . What do we know of these men, and of their passions?” (47-8). Although some might contextualize Perrault’s media treatments of Île-aux-Coudres as romantic and antimodernist, the result of a non-resident seeking out the poetics and politics of a regionalized minority within a marginalized Québec, White has something much different in mind here. He sees Perrault’s visual explorations of local dialect, daily life, and fishing and hunting as a project that is “basically activist, one that presents traditional cultural forms (language, hunting rituals) in a context defined by modernity rather than folklore” (49).

Equally, White understands Desmond Fennell’s work in the Gaeltacht as based in the politics of language and regionality as well as in the broader implications for the relationship between modern media and Irish culture. Although Fennell, as White points out, “didn’t have much to say about film or television as such, his ideas about regionalism and internationalism clearly form an intellectual superstructure for the Gaeltacht media activism of the early 1970s and 1980s” (151). White thereby links

Fennell with Perrault according to their shared concern for cultural survival based on regional and minority language politics as the core of resisting modernization – “the Gaeltacht and Irish for Fennell, Charlevoix and its very distinct variant of French for Perrault” (151). There are also important differences between the strategies of Fennell as writer and Perrault as media maker, since “Fennell’s Gaeltacht was not the homeland *manqué* of Perrault’s Charlevoix, but instead a sort of diasporic utopia, one that demanded considerably more linguistic adjustment than the sort of fine tuning that Perrault’s ear required when faced with the distinctly non-urban French of Île-aux-Coudres” (153). Yet the comparison between Fennell and Perrault also hints at what White sees as the core of the problem of Gaeltacht activism at this time, which is the central role of people involved in the movement who were not originally from Gaeltacht areas. Fennell, like Perrault, could easily be cast as an outsider in this respect. White, however, posits a more complex situation in which Fennell and Perrault might both be seen as diasporic activists who organized their politics according to ideas about marginality that were non-nostalgic.

White demarcates Fennell’s ideas as illuminating cinematic life in the Gaeltacht, with Perrault remaining “the best filmmaker that the 1970s Gaeltacht movement never had” (174). In the place of Perrault, White offers another resourceful comparison between the decentralized Gaeltacht video project *Cinegae* and the NFB’s *Fogo Island* films. As in his contribution to Varga’s collection, White outlines the Newfoundland Project according to the history of the NFB’s Challenge for Change program (1967), which had a twofold mandate of “regionalization and increased collaboration between filmmakers and their subjects” (59). White’s subsequent exploration of Colin Low’s process on *Fogo Island* suggests that the project was innovative in its use of documentary to communicate the particular concerns of a community in such a way that directly informed both the filmmaking process and the final product itself. White sees this as a similar strategy to Perrault’s, although he points to Low’s innovation in outlining a circular process for incorporating feedback. This included assigning film subjects the first rights for editorial changes; well-advertised, advanced local screenings at times and places agreed upon collaboratively; and screenings to local people whose hegemonic authority might affect the working lives of the film subjects (this was done so that people with authority within the community could film responses to the screened segments and participate in public conversations in order to neutralize possible tensions or repercussions). The *Fogo Island* films’ use of *verité* aesthetics, White suggests, abandons “both linear (or horizontal) form and facile sound-image relations in search of something different, in search of renewed connections between filmmakers, subjects, and viewers” (80).

White makes it quite clear that in encouraging such connections, the *Fogo Island* films do not substitute community collaboration for the filmmaker’s technical and aesthetic skill or expertise. Rather, these films break down conventional hierarchies between those being represented onscreen and those conjuring up the representations behind the camera lens. In this respect, White offers a comparison between the Newfoundland project and *Cinegae*; much like the *Fogo Island* films in Canada, *Cinegae* has received little attention in standard film histories in Ireland. *Cinegae* is ostensibly an experiment in community television, one that used local video screenings rather than broadcast for its distribution. Much like the *Fogo* films, White argues, the *Cinegae* project was “an example of a locally rooted and internationally aware

experiment in the political use of emerging technology” (183). Cinegael was headed by Bob Quinn, a filmmaker heavily influenced by Fennell’s politics, who partnered with Gaeltacht activist and journalist Seosamh Ó Cuaig in a shared quest for reinforcing the identity of a threatened linguistic minority. Quinn modeled Cinegael explicitly on the NFB’s Challenge for Change model and the Fogo films in particular. Quinn took this model much further, though, than an attempt to break down conventional hierarchies between filmmaker, subject, and viewer, seeking instead “to de-professionalize filmmaking, and to dismantle the film industry” (199). Indeed, in its aesthetically grainy, black and white video productions, Cinegael is an example of a popular activist art that searches for a kind of solidarity within the Gaeltacht rights movement that is more in tune with the Radio Eye than any other case study in this book.

Finally, White compares the late 1960s development of television in the Faroe Islands to the struggle to achieve an Irish-language television service in the Gaeltacht. The origins of Faroese television lie neither in private enterprise nor a state-funded service, but rather “as a group of non-profit organizations that at first had no real government connections except for the obligation to follow regulations, which got in their way as often as not” (91). The group that emerged in 1968, Sjóðvarpsfelagid í Havn (Tórshavn Television Association), initially intended to create locally viable television production, with broadcasts free of advertising that were initially financed through taxation. From the beginning, however, Faroese television had very little Faroese-language content; this despite its formation as essentially “a grassroots operation that was run in a non-commercial way and merely sought to bring a crucial part of modern communications technology to the Faroes” (111). As such, this case is a fascinating example of the use of screen media to negotiate modernization in the latter half of the 20th century – one that, despite Sjóðvarpsfelagid í Havn’s lack of reliance on local language in its productions, was still an important example to Irish Gaeltacht media activists. This is perhaps the result of the Faroes acting as an example to the Gaeltacht of “a community whose ‘small language’ had been kept intact and whose control over local affairs had been secured” (208). White’s book, more generally, is as rich in its source documentation – often sources that reside in the personal files and collections of Sjóðvarpsfelagid í Havn founding members and Gaeltacht activists – as it is innovative in its judgment of geographic, aesthetic, and political interactivity, marking this text as one that will no doubt engage scholars, producers, and activists alike.

Writing the history of cultural production in Canada outside the national/ist model, a task that each of these books takes on in its own way, remains a challenge indeed for those of us who write about culture in Atlantic Canada. On the one hand, the national is still a site in which many significant avenues of cultural production are financed and circulated through such dominant organizations as the NFB, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Certainly many of these organizations have their local or “regional” dimensions, which influence the ways in which culture takes shape on the ground within particular communities. Yet “culture” is still often examined according to the ways such dominant, national/ist cultural institutions produce and disseminate it, which means that the cultural forms therein also become dominant insofar as they continue to be financed and advanced from the centres of not only state but also civil and corporate

capital. Some historians and cultural studies scholars have effectively critiqued such capitalist centres of cultural production by reading these institutions' dominant narratives against themselves, unpacking the ways in which the national as a formative category might be reconsidered in terms of class, gender, racialization, ethnicity, religion, and region.<sup>8</sup> Finding ways to investigate federally funded cultural institutions without reifying the national as a site of inquiry remains difficult; this is particularly true when it comes to decentralizing the very cultural institutions one means to critique.

How to move beyond this circular line of critique? I admit my own reliance on these frameworks, which is promoted by the availability of the rich, well-kept, and expertly staffed archives of major cultural institutions in Canada. Yet equally important to exposing the dominant and demonstrating its occlusion of the marginal and interaction with the resistant is engaging with the edges of cultural production on their own terms. A study such as White's should be commended in this respect, since it depends on a complicated research process that included digging up decaying videotapes in basements and garages in order to chart the history of pirate television in the Gaeltacht. Equally, Hamilton's contribution to Varga's anthology speaks to research and creative strategies that help address the absence of "the document" in its various forms. As historians know well, finding ways to tell the stories of people and places that have been historically under-represented in dominant discourses (or archival collections) is deeply connected to present-day battles for social justice. So is recognizing spaces in which marginalized and resistant communities speak on their own terms. These studies and spaces are possible through such strategies as oral history and in mining the personal archives of cultural producers active in social movements, although this is not to suggest that such approaches are always easy, achievable, or even desirable. Often the best strategy is accepting that the players involved in such movements disseminate their own knowledge beyond the academy, in ways that might transform academic conceptions of who holds the reins of knowledge itself. And so there remain underexplored possibilities in writing the history of screen media, among other forms of cultural production, which can help film and media historians ask more complex questions about what culture is and what we do in its name.

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8 See, for example, Jeffrey Brison's history of financing a cultural and intellectual infrastructure in Canada that challenges the state model of culture-making up to and including the Massey Commission, in his *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada: American Philanthropy in the Arts and Letters in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005). For an activist history of the Canada Council and its intersection with SSHRCC that critically investigates producers' reliance on these sources of funding, and the ways in which the Canada Council in particular resisted regionalization, see Clive Robertson, *Policy Matters: Administrations of Art and Culture* (YYZ Books: Toronto, 2006) as well as Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). For indigenous perspectives on museum representation in Canada and the United States that move beyond examining Canadian cultural institutions according to their reproduction of national/ist narratives, see Lynda Jessup with Shannon Bagg, eds., *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery* (Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002).