
john grierson

the politics of propaganda

by gary evans



Stuart Legg and John Grierson were playing for high stakes against Nazi propaganda chief Goebbels

If John Grierson and the documentary film are nearly synonymous in the lexicon of film, few people realize how complex and totalitarian were the politics of propaganda which were intertwined in his philosophy. In this article we shall examine some major aspects of his thought and try to demonstrate how his philosophy was applied in the wartime context at the National Film Board of Canada.

When Grierson was a graduate student at the University of Chicago from 1924-27, the core of his philosophy crystallized as he rejected Walter Lippmann's pessimistic belief that in this century the few had to do the thinking for the many. Lippmann's pessimism stemmed from a belief that there was neither time nor adequate information for the citizens to make informed judgements. Grierson resisted this analysis and donned the cloak of the totalitarian propagandist. He claimed that education, which he equated with propaganda, was the tool to serve as the active instrument of the democratic idea,

operating "in the quiet light of ordinary humanism."

He believed the task of propaganda was to speak intimately and quietly about real things and real people. For the rest of his life he reiterated dogmatically the theme of propaganda, service and community: "We can, by propaganda, widen the horizons of the schoolroom and give to every individual, each in his place and work, a living conception of the community which he has the privilege to serve." Grierson's propaganda crusade though secular, had its roots at least partly in his Calvinist upbringing. "I derive my authority from Moses" he would say late in life. This attitude also allowed him to avoid partisan politics and to protect the documentary movement from partisan attack. To Grierson's political masters in Canada, he was a 'hot gospeller' who, while bolstering their wartime Government, would eventually fall victim to his own propaganda.

Grierson skirted political labels quite easily. With the world

at war in the early 1940's, he insisted that the State was the machinery by which the best interests of the people are secured. Simultaneously he denied the advent of socialism. "We are entering upon a new and interim society which is neither capitalist nor socialist but in which we can achieve central planning without loss of individual initiative, . . . in which public unity and discipline can be achieved without forgetting the humanitarian virtues..."

He was also careful to distinguish between being totalitarian for evil and totalitarian for good. As a practitioner of the good, he felt he was "serving the greatest mobilization of the public imagination since the Churches lost their grip." And one can discover in so many of Canada's wartime propaganda films an attempt to transmit comprehension of the dramatic patterns which were the backbone of society. Under Grierson's guidance, information became a two-way process between State and people, people and State. This activity, linked to a commitment to inspire rather than to preach, was no less than a war for men's minds.

The Canadian films were quite different from British film propaganda, produced in large part by the original documentary school Grierson had left in England. The British were concerned with local tactics of defensive warfare, reiterating themes from 'Britain can take it' to 'Britain can dish it out too' later in the war. Studiously avoiding any enunciation of war aims other than military victory (Churchill's orders), the films of the Ministry of Information were with few exceptions, flaccid endeavours.

The two theatrical film series (each released monthly) which emerged in Canada during the war were **Canada Carries On** and **The World In Action**. (The French versions were **En Avant Canada** and **Les Reportages**) These were group efforts, hence they lacked individual credits. The guiding hand behind the two Canadian series was Stuart Legg, one of the pioneers of the British documentary movement, who in the winter of 1939 had come to Canada to make two films for the Government Motion Picture Bureau. When Grierson became the first Film Commissioner of the National Film Board, he asked Legg to join him in organizing theatrical documentary production.

He and Grierson were in a deadly chess game with their nemesis, Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels, whose weekly theatrical newsreel, **Wochenschauen**, emphasized triumphant battle scenes and themes of inevitable victory, underscored by morale-building music. Legg and his team replied by cutting captured German footage and Allied footage into a monthly analysis of the larger strategic plans required to defeat German strategies of world conquest. The Canadian propaganda was heavily influenced by the techniques and rhythm of the widely popular American newsreel, **The March of Time**, though the depth of analysis far surpassed anything **The March of Time** had ever done.

Canada Carries On, begun in 1940, was made primarily for Canadian audiences. The series concentrated heavily upon themes of transport and communication. A continued emphasis on the need to integrate all national forces implied how Canada could be totalitarian for the good. With few exceptions these films avoided hate-mongering, parochialism and vilification of the enemy. They stressed the importance of a broad military strategy and described convincingly the tremendous power behind the nation's cooperative and corporate energies. An issue like **Inside Fighting Canada** enunciated the theme of building together for the future and called for a worldwide

faith in neighborliness. (Note the soft-core internationalism.) The film did not need to speak of victory, for the narrator stated dramatically that Canada had a secret weapon: the simple power of Canadians fighting of their own free will. (Conscription had not yet become necessary.) This inspiring phrase seemed to contain the essence of what Canada's free men and women were fighting for.

In 1941, **Churchill's Island** won the NFB's first Academy Award for best documentary film. Legg and his unit did not try to cover up the fact that battered Britain was on the defensive. If the film was a variation of the 'Britain can take it' theme, it was aggressive too. Germany had failed to reckon with the RAF above and the people's army below. Narrator Lorne Greene, now recognized as Canada's 'voice of democracy', concluded authoritatively that Britain had an inner strength, a stubborn calm which iron and steel and bombs could never pierce. His last words bravely flaunted the challenge, "Come—if you dare."

Another number, entitled **Women Are Warriors**, compared the important war work of women in England and Russia to that of Canada. Russia was prudently labeled a cooperative rather than communist state. It was asserted that Canada profited from these two allied examples. In an attempt to compliment Canadian women, the narration stated that the women of Canada had learned to turn the domestic needle and thread into the tools of war. Deftness learned at home in traditional women's roles had come to serve them well in the war industry. Reminiscent of early Soviet techniques of montage, the film employed superb editing to create a fast tempo. At one point the film cut three times from shots of factory to plane to factory in order to demonstrate how important woman's supportive role was to the war effort.

The World In Action series, started in June, 1942, reached out to a wider audience and had two main goals: first, to relate local strategies to world ones and second, to influence and direct the political attitudes of North American audiences toward an internationally oriented postwar ethic. Again, the series avoided partisan politics and concentrated upon inspiration. **The New York Times** praised these films which attempted to give the people great hope and faith in themselves and, in a brave new world. The secret of success, said the **Times**, was that the editorial sights of the series' subjects were raised high above the level of nationalism.

Our Northern Neighbor exemplified this approach by its attempt to portray Russia fairly. The film provided an historical overview of Russia and characteristically, never once used the word communism. The commentary suggested that Joseph Stalin, a quieter voice than Trotsky, was leading Russia to build a pattern of socialism for all the world to see. The Russian citizen was preparing for the promise of ultimate freedom and good living after all these lean years. The film ended with the internationalist message, "We seek the cooperation of all nations, large and small, to eliminate tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance."

One of Grierson's favourite films of the series was **The War For Men's Minds**, which he called a film on the Lincoln theme: "When the common people rise to find their liberty, not the gates of hell will prevail against them." Prime Minister King ought to have been pleased by the film, especially when he and Roosevelt were linked as the two voices of North American leadership. The film described the war as a gigantic mobilization for men's minds through the media of propaganda: press,

motion picture, and radio. The spiritual defeat of Germany had already been accomplished. The aftermath of war was not to be punishment and/or isolation, but brotherhood. It concluded heroically that the people came first, the people came before all.

Grierson and Legg spent the war years encouraging the NFB staff to make films to develop national unity and to describe war activities and related themes, all to prepare the peace. Unlike the Germans, who believed that war made splendid propaganda, Grierson had long been committed to the Bertrand Russell maxim that peace should be made as exciting as war. As Grierson put it bluntly but privately in 1943, "I confess I can't ever get very excited about the war effort *per se* and feel that any information regarding it must somehow try to get behind the shot and shell. The surface values—the guns and the campaigns and the braveries and the assembly lines and the sacrifices—are, I think, taken by themselves the greatest bore on earth . . ." Grierson had turned his eyes to peacetime information. He hoped to get relevant Government departments behind such concrete themes as conservation, nutrition, and people as producers and consumers, so that all the information would be tied to common ends. He foresaw in this organization more a Ministry of Education than anything else.

Here again we see how Grierson's philosophy of education/propaganda was to be harnessed to the machinery of state to create a totalitarian world for the good. Under the spell of his own propaganda, he believed that all this was leading to a new kind of democracy. "The essence of the educational process has been taken over by governments and industry in the name of propaganda . . . One might say that we had removed the Church influence from education only to hand it to the bureaucrats of public and private enterprise." He believed that it was his duty to prepare the public to recognize that total civilian effort and Government initiative were to become a permanent feature of twentieth century life.

To this end Grierson had already encouraged the establishment of non-theatrical circuits across Canada. Under the able direction of Donald Buchanan, the Central Government Distribution Service had expanded the non-theatrical distribution system to some 43 travelling circuits, serving up to one quarter of a million viewers per month by mid-1942. Each circuit reached 20 rural communities per month and returned the same day each month. Some of the films contained discussion trailers which suggested how the audience could follow up some of the themes articulated in the films. One field representative gave a typical report of the audience discussion when a half dozen local citizens took the platform with him during a half-hour intermission to have a round table discussion. "Criticism was not lacking," he admitted, "but was usually quite intelligent and the discussions always took a decidedly positive direction. Very constructive consideration of social issues came to the fore." The importance of these in-field reports should not be missed, for they allowed Grierson and his staff to keep their fingers on the pulse of public opinion and to measure, in part, the effect of the NFB's propaganda.

Along the same lines, the NFB tried to integrate film as part of the branch activity of the trade union movement. The National Trade Union film circuit was sponsored by the Canadian Congress of Labour, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, the Workers' Educational Association and the National Film Board. From September to May, monthly

showings were held in union halls across the country. Film themes included subjects on unemployment, recreational programmes, rehabilitation, labour management committees and international relations. Films were woven into the normal pattern of union educational work as was the technique of discussion shows. From this came production of specific discussion trailers in which ordinary trade unionists gave their point of view on the main film and often involved the audience by stimulating controversy.

There were also the non-theatrical industrial films, geared both to the needs of the war and to describing the growth of Canadian industries and the development of the nation's natural resources. The programme was inaugurated in January 1943 to provide one show a month for eleven months. Showings were held in the plants, partly on company time, partly on lunch breaks and/or between work shifts. It was estimated that these films reached an annual audience of 400,000.

Community or ethnographic films were another genre of film which did much to bridge the barriers between various cultural groups comprising the Canadian mosaic. The "Peoples of Canada" series, made from 1941-43, portrayed major ethnic groups at work building the nation, and at play. Glimpses of Indian, Eskimo, Polish, Scottish, and Ukrainian communities went far in interpreting Canada to Canadians and in encouraging respect and toleration for others.

Another non-theatrical sphere was exploited with the establishment of the Volunteer Projection Services. Here films were made available to interested groups such as Junior Boards of Trade, Chambers of Commerce, Public Libraries, Youth, Women's and Church groups, all of whom sponsored film series. By the end of the war, the non-theatrical audience in Canada was about one million.

In addition to the above outlets, there was an attempt to exploit the newsreel as an effective tool of communication. Three series, **Eyes Front**, **Canada Communiqué** and **Pictorial Hometown News** were developed for troops overseas; **Eyes Front** was also for training camps at home. There were, in addition, four other series developed for rural and industrial non-theatrical circuits: **Rural Newsreel**, **Industrial Newsreel**, **Front Line Reports** and **Screen Magazine**.

All of this was remarkable because rural and working class Canada were not just simply linked to global events; the people were learning by viewing and discussing films. This was a way of making citizens part of the active democratic process. Grierson's idea of totalitarian propaganda, this two way communication between the governing and the governed, was an application of what Marshall McLuhan would later call the 'global village' concept. Film, education, and discussion linked the human-ness and one-ness of the individual human being in his own environment with the world as a whole.

Looking at film propaganda and information in total, (Grierson had become head of the Wartime Information Board in 1943) Prime Minister King and his Government may have been convinced that what Grierson was doing was worthwhile in the context of the war. Besides, the Prime Minister was benefitting from frequent publicity which disguised his usual awkward manner before the public—Opposition critics had complained that images of King in Government propaganda were as numerous as the posterity of Abraham! More likely, the King Government was too busy to devote time or interest



Observing the shoot from one of four sets was part of the crew on *How's the War News*: Alfred Jacquemin, camera; Fred Govan, grip; Gordon Sparling, director; Miss Boulkind, script girl and Phil Taylor, assistant director

to information policy. In fact, it was amazing what the NFB got away with, Stuart Legg admitted years later.

The internationalism of Film Board propaganda would, by war's end and in the wake of the infamous Gouzenko spy scandal and Royal Commission, be inconsistent with the Government's position to align itself with the United States' postwar foreign policy. The so-called internationalist position which Canada adopted was displayed in its support of the United Nations. The U.N., however, was to become an international forum from which the two great rival powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, would attempt to conduct their respective propaganda campaigns of words while seeking to win and hold friends and champions. In Canada, the hot war against Fascist aggression would become a cold war against communist ideology and the erstwhile Russian ally. In this context, Grierson's soft-core internationalism and his support of total mobilization of the country's energies to win the hearts and minds of its citizens to this end, became anomalous.

By 1945, Grierson was preparing to leave Canada and move his crusade on to the international level. Before leaving, he hoped he could marry the Film Board to the Department of External Affairs, not only to ensure its continued survival but also to push the internationalist message in Canada's foreign policy. He hoped that Canada would present an image of its international achievement to a worldwide audience, divided into specialized audiences corresponding with the specialized interests and groupings of the Canadian population. "The real internationalism," he had said, "is in the manias we share with each other."

His choice of successor, 29-year-old James Beveridge, was impolitic and smacked of nepotism; Beveridge was cousin to Norman Robertson, Under Secretary of State for External

Affairs and King's closest foreign affairs adviser. "No one who was realistic would have given a serious thought to the Beveridge succession," said J.W. Pickersgill years later. More significantly, Canada was not prepared to expound Grierson's brand of internationalist foreign policy through the medium of film. Ross McLean became acting Commissioner for 18 months, then permanent Commissioner in 1947 for two more years.

King's aid, Walter Turnbull, who was Grierson's conduit to the Prime Minister, believes that during the war, the people at the top were probably not seeing enough film propaganda to fully appreciate the direction toward which Grierson was steering the country's information policy. He has summarized the picture in 1945 incisively: "Grierson had an over-appreciation of his efforts; his political masters had an under-appreciation which was as far below as was his above. The gap between the two was tremendous."

Thus perished John Grierson's idealistic war for men's minds. He had been fortunate to appear on the scene at an historical moment when world crisis allowed him to develop his unique philosophy of totalitarian propaganda for the good. Victory achieved, liberal democracy sensed that it was better to avoid totalitarianism and say nothing to the millions, than to undo the credo of individualism and laissez faire. And if communication was necessary, the ruling elite would speak to the masses in a one-way process. After rejecting the Grierson conception of propaganda, Canada praised its citizens for having sacrificed enough to make the world safe for the democracy of ruling elites. The ordinary citizen was once again adrift in a sea of alienation, no closer than before to having a significant grasp or input into the destiny of his 'democratic' society. Grierson's unrealized dream of propaganda as education and totalitarianism for the good remained a tantalizing legacy for the progressives of the next generation. □