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Our stories live on: The Digitization of Memory at the National Film Board of Canada

When the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) celebrated its seventieth anniversary in January 2009, the occasion was marked with the inauguration of its "Online Screening Room," an archival initiative comprised of the digitization and dissemination of over five hundred of its films, available for free streaming from anywhere in the world. Since that time, the online collection has grown to nearly 2000 films, and the NFB has also launched a variety of complimentary applications for smart-phones and tablet computers. Branded with the tagline "*The world changes, our stories live on*,"[1] these initiatives signal an explicit claim on cultural heritage by Canada's national public film producer and distributor. In a bid to maintain relevancy in the face of massive budget cuts,[2] the NFB has turned inwards, concentrating on a marketing strategy that emphasizes their role as a venerable institution and official purveyor of Canada's "*living memory*."[3] While the online Screening Room is an important step in the preservation of Canada's rapidly deteriorating cinematic archive,[4] its particular curation and framing online poses problems for the articulation and construction of a critical and polysemic Canadian identity. Through the inclusion and omission of specific films and their histories, as well as its selective approach to its own institutional past, the NFB's

1. National Film Board of Canada, "About the National Film Board of Canada," http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/press-room/press-releases.php?id=19524 (accessed April 7, 2010).
2. National Film Board of Canada, "NFB 2000: Context," http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/publications/en/actionplan1996/2001.html (accessed April 14, 2010). The most drastic of these were the 1996 cut to the NFB's parliamentary allocation by approximately 32%, and then again in 2008, when the Harper Conservatives cut nearly $45 million to arts funding, which also had a drastic effect on the NFB's finances, specifically in the cancellation of the Canadian Memory Fund, upon which they depended for support for preservation initiatives (CBC News, "Opposition launches Commons review of arts cuts," http://www.cbc.ca/arts/story/2008/08/26/opposition-arts.html, accessed April 14, 2010).
3. Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, "National Film Board," http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2008-2009/inst/NFB/NFB01-eng.asp (accessed April 7, 2010).
4. The aforementioned budget cuts in 2008 to the arts hit preservation initiatives especially hard, resulting in the closure of such important granting agencies as the Canadian Memory Fund and the Audio-Visual Preservation Trust, with the result that Canada is significantly behind similarly positioned nations in the safeguarding of its own audio-visual heritage, which as of a 1995 task force report, was described as "endangered," with only one of the first 20 films produced in Canada still in existence. Task Force on the Preservation and Enhanced Use of Canada's Audio-Visual Heritage, *Fading Away* (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1995), 4.

Screening Room works to simultaneously represent and contain difference, against which an implicitly homogenous, white Anglo or Francophone identity is nonetheless defined. This strategy, which I am here describing as 'technological heritage,' attempts to an unproblematic, shared national heritage through an equally uncritical rhetoric of technological instrumentalism. This is especially troubling given the NFB's own history as an influential force for activism and social change, and should be understood within the context of presentist demands for a heritage which prioritizes individualism, technological nationalism, and an official discourse of multiculturalism.

While the increased availability of the NFB's filmic archive has been met with great enthusiasm by many, both within Canada and internationally, others have suggested that the NFB's relevance has been relegated to the past tense; as film critic Matthew Hays asks in a recent article, "is the NFB an institution that has nowhere to go but to look back to the glory days of its golden age?"[5] This nostalgic trend is echoed by the content of some of its recent film productions, such as the Oscar-winning *Ryan* (2004), and *The Lipsett Diaries* (2010) which both take as their subjects former NFB filmmakers who, like the Board itself, had their heyday in the 1960s and 1970s and have since suffered tragic declines. Similarly retrospective is *The Memory of Angels* (2008), a rhapsodic collage of archival NFB footage woven together as a filmic tribute to Montreal, the home of the Board's headquarters for over five decades.

At the same time, the NFB is attempting to lay claim to future relevance through the (highly fundable) language of "cutting-edge technology" and progress, constantly invoking "the digital revolution"[6] and the solutions offered by new media as a way to maintain solvency in the face of dwindling resources. This simultaneous invocation of a technologically-mediated future, coupled with an increasing reliance on their historical significance and past success, creates a strange temporal dissonance, subsuming unresolved historical and societal conflicts under a vague triumphalist narrative. While greater access to the cinematic archive is undoubtedly important, it is worth asking what

5. Matthew Hays, "To NFB or Not to NFB," *The Walrus* (March 2009). http://www.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2009.03-NFB-national-film-board-seventieth-birthday/ (accessed April 6, 2010).
6. National Film Board of Canada, *NFB Strategic Plan: 2008-2009 to 2012-2013* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2008), 4.

exactly is being preserved, and in the process, who this "living memory" is speaking for. By looking at the way in which the NFB presents itself and a particular vision of Canadian identity through the mobilization of "*our stories*," and their framing online, I seek to address the way in which omissions and strategic exclusions function similarly to deny particular histories and identities. Through an exploration of the prohibitive and ideological functions of "national heritage," such initiatives necessarily work to promote, particular subjectivities in an effort to consolidate and unify a specific national identity. Given the constant looming threat of more budget cuts and even cancellation, especially given the latest election of a Conservative government explicitly hostile towards Canada's publically-funded arts institutions, the NFB's future is precarious; the narrative of their own history and that of the country must therefore conform to a certain national mythology that situates Canada's struggles as largely in the past, most of its battles already won.

Following Graham and Howard, I argue that the concept of heritage, while concerned with artifacts and events of the past, is "present-centered…created, shaped and managed by, and in response to, the demands of the present."[7] As such, while they are open to revision and change, heritage collections confer a particular power on the institution in possession of them. Heritage and identity are often invoked simultaneously, especially in national terms, but their interrelationships are complex and contingent, shifting spatially and temporally in ways that both effect, and are in turn affected by, dynamics of power already in place. While identities are not exclusively dependent on heritage, they are strengthened by the presence of a certain materiality, which can represent "the solidarity felt by generations of heterogeneous individuals towards a unifying narrative of belonging … heritage provides a rather effective material and symbolic support for these narratives, both serving as a resource for the representation of identities and a place for its performance."[8] Heritage has the power to exclude and include particular representations and thus prioritize some while silencing others; as Hall

7. Brian Graham and Peter Howard, "Heritage and Identity," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 4.
8. Marta Anico and Elsa Peralta, introduction to *Heritage and Identity: Engagement and Demission in the Contemporary World*, ed. Marta Anico and Elsa Peralta (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

articulates, it is "through identifying with these representations [of national heritage] … [that] we come to be its 'subjects'—by 'subjecting' ourselves to its dominant meanings."[9]

In her recent book *Saving Cinema*, film archivist and theorist Caroline Frick argues that the contemporary surge of interest in media preservation and accessibility is inherently political—that despite its implicit resonance and continuity with the past, the contemporary "heritage movement" is a relatively recent phenomenon—it's only since the 1980s that the term heritage has been employed in relation to film preservation. Frick links these developments both to the urgency posed by decaying nitrate and the colorization debates of the eighties, as well as a concurrent wave of cultural and postcolonial scholarship taking up the concept of archive in general. The confluence of these factors creates ambiguity, as arguments about the inherent value of preserving celluloid film rely implicitly on concepts of authenticity, canonicity, and their value as both art and historical documents, while much of the study of the postmodern archive aims to deconstruct precisely this notion of it as an objective and passive guardian of artifacts, able to unproblematically represent a vanished past, privileging instead a more nuanced understanding of its role in shoring up preexisting systems of power and authority.

Within the heritage paradigm that the NFB is increasingly forced to work within, their potential to take risks and create innovative or controversial work is obviously attenuated. Despite their status as an arms-length government agency, "the logic of cultural heritage," as Frick describes, "has traditionally worked to reify and strengthen ties to a particular level of authority and power, the nation, and thus to legitimize particular player and artifacts in the archival process." Like all heritage projects, the NFB's online screening room is subject to the demands of the present; that is, the representation of a particular past. Given the Board's own incredibly diverse and often controversial history, the idea that they might be able to generate a unifying narrative of Canadian Heritage, let alone a unifying institutional narrative, must be approached with some skepticism.

9. Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-Settling 'the Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation," in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'*, ed. Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo (London: Routledge, 2005), 25.

NFB History, briefly:

Since its establishment in 1939 in order to make propaganda films in aid of Canada's efforts in World War II, the NFB has been deeply invested in creating national unity through the educative and communicative features of film. As Druick points out, the NFB's creation, along with the appointment of the Scottish documentary filmmaker John Grierson as its first commissioner, formed part of a British project of expansionism, imperialism, and colonialism during those years early years.[10] Using the long-repressed and exploited culture of the French-Canadians, who had historically been the target of assimilationist politics, as type of "bulwark against Americanism"[11] to shore up the as yet undefined and ephemeral "Canadian identity" against the threat of an encroaching cultural imperialism from the south. Grierson and the Board pursued a vision of the nation's "diversity in unity."[12] In 1950, with the revision of the National Film Act, government intervention into the NFB's direct operation and administration was curtailed, its mandate "to produce … distribute … and to promote the production and distribution of films designed to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations," officially enshrined.[13]

After its early work during the war, the NFB relocated its headquarters from Ottawa to Montreal in 1953, where it opened the first French studio, and from the mid-1960s on, began to experience the productive energies characteristic of the Quiet Revolution.[14] That era, which lasted up until the late 1970s, is associated with the golden age of the Board, when the cinema direct style with which the NFB would become synonymous was being developed, and their films came to be associated with risk-taking in both form and content. Programs such as the social activist documentary initiative, *Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle* (CFC/SN), which lasted from 1967 to 1980, and

10. Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board of Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2007), 33.
11. Ibid, 43.
12. Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board of Canada*, 43.
13. National Film Board of Canada, "Organization: Mandate," http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/about-us/organization.php (accessed April 14, 2010).
14. The Quiet Revolution, known in French as *la révolution tranquille*, was a time of great political and societal change in Quebec, characterized by "a political rupture from . . . the supremacy of the [Catholic] Church." (Chantal Nadeau, "BB and the Beasts: Brigitte Bardot and the Canadian Seal Controversy," *Screen* 37, no. 3 (1996): 243).

later Studio D, the Board's only explicitly feminist initiative, which ran from 1974 until 1996, were groundbreaking and controversial, gaining recognition internationally and at home for their overt opposition to the status quo in ways that are difficult to imagine for a government institution today.

These years also saw a growing recognition of the changing demographic make-up of Canada, and films reflecting these and other important social shifts were prioritized. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the NFB continued to support emerging filmmakers from minority and First Nations communities. In 1996, the Liberal government cut the NFB's funding by a third, forcing them to make massive layoffs and downscale their output to exclusively documentary and animation works. Studio D was a casualty of these cuts, and its mandate was partially taken over by the now-cancelled *Reel Diversity* program, which was run as a contest to attract filmmakers of colour. While still associated with socially-conscious filmmaking and the support of emerging talent, the NFB's recent documentary output has shifted both its labour force and production focus outwards: most of their contemporary non-fiction work is the result of co-productions, with much of the post-production work contracted outside of the board; in terms of content, these films have tended to take a more global perspective, concentrating increasingly on injustices and atrocities going on abroad.

The Online Screening Room

Currently, the NFB has managed to digitize and upload nearly two thousand of its over thirteen thousand films to the online Screening Room.[15] Due to financial and storage constraints, as well as the massive investment of time digital migration requires, the online archive is necessarily selective; its initial offering the result of a curatorial process, whereby two of the Board's collection analysts selected a batch of NFB films to be included online**.**[16] Titles are said to be added at a rate of three to five a week,[17] and the site solicits recommendations from visitors as to what they would like to see added, which along with filmmaker requests, and copyright clearance issues are factored into

15. Interview with NFB Collections Expert, Albert Ohayon, April 21, 2011.
16. National Film Board of Canada, "Got a favourite NFB film? We'd love to put it online…" NFB.ca Blog, comment posted April 2, 2009, http://blog.NFB.ca/tag/site-features/ (accessed April 14, 2010).
17. Ibid.

lists produced by both the French and English NFB collection experts every three months. [18] In its attempt to create the widest audience possible, the Screening Room is largely comprised of NFB award-winning animated and documentary classics, early feature films, animation, and nostalgic educational fare. Generally, there is an aversion to controversial films on the site, and work containing explicit or disturbing material is labeled accordingly. Playlists, available in both French and English and also collated by "experts," aim to make the vast offerings of the site more legible and navigable through the streaming of particular interests. Up until quite recently, no mention could be found of any of the NFB's more controversial programs, including *CFC/SN* and Studio D, on any of the playlists.[19]

The Screening Room, which has become the NFB's main website (http://nfb.ca/ or http://onf.ca), is separate from the institutional (government) page for the National Film Board (http://NFB-onf.gc.ca/). On the institutional site, one can find more information pertaining to the actual history and entire catalogue of the Board, as well as search for the descriptions of titles have not been added to the online archive; the Screening Room's search function makes it difficult to locate much beyond the films that are already digitized and available. For instance, a search for the award-winning 1981 film, *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography*, does not yield any results for films, only a link to the film's brief description on the institutional site. Collections expert Albert Ohayon describes this as a deliberate decision by the board: given the site's role as a public forum accountable to all Canadians, some films have been deemed too graphic or too controversial to be shown on the site.[20] Unfortunately, it would seem that the majority of these omitted films are those that deal with issues faced by women; for example, despite being a major director, producer, writer and editor, as well as the first woman to direct a film in Quebec, and the creator of the NFB's "*En tant que femmes*"

18. Interview with NFB Collections Expert, Albert Ohayon, April 21, 2011.
19. Michael Brendan Baker, e-mail message to author, April 12, 2010: "For the playlists: as the book [*Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*] demonstrates, CFC is like the sad orphan of the NFB and the online catalog demonstrated that until our playlists appeared."
20. Interview with NFB Collections Expert, Albert Ohayon, April 21, 2011.

program,[21] Anne Claire Poirier has only three of the over a dozen films she directed for the NFB available online, none of which are the films she is particularly known for. Her major works, such as *Le Temps de l'avant* (1975), a dramatic feature about abortion, and *Mourir à tue-tête* (1979) a film about rape, are not, as of yet, available through the NFB Screening Room. These omissions are quite problematic in a consideration of the NFB's self-appointed role as a caretaker of national memory; functioning in a manner akin to selective amnesia, important films that do not serve a contemporary rhetoric of Canada's post-sexist, multicultural imaginary of itself are in danger of being relegated to oblivion.

The aforementioned playlists also gloss over and ignore much of the institution's own important controversies and significant initiatives, in favour of a safer, less political focus on "Hockey Movies," "Winter Sports Movies," and "Fun Films about Science and Technology." Their playlist in honour of International Women's Day (March 8th), entitled "10 Films by Influential Women" fails to even mention the significance of Studio D, "the world's first permanent, state-funded women's film unit;"[22] the only films on the list that even deal specifically with the oppression of women or "women's issues" are the 1995 film *Who's Counting?*, which attempts to demystify the economy's reliance on the unpaid labour of women, and a 1990 film by Donna Read, *The Burning Times*, about the European witch hunts "just a few hundred years ago."[23] While all of the rest of the playlist's films are important in their own right, and deal with a host of issues from Native rights to nuclear war, the selections point to a general reluctance on the part of the NFB to affiliate itself with anything associated with an explicitly feminist agenda, especially second-wave feminism, given that all the films date from 1982 or later. In fact, using the search by keyword function for "feminism," only three films on the English site are retrieved, two of which are in the aforementioned playlist. On the French site, the equivalent term, "*féminisme*," is not even listed. Neither site offers "sexism" as a keyword with which to sort films, a decision that seems impossible to separate from the

21. Marie-Ève Fortin, "The En tant que femmes Series, the Film *Souris, tu m'inquiètes*, and the Imaging of Women's Consciousness in 1970s Quebec," in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, ed. Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 117-35.
22. National Film Board of Canada, "NFB Pioneers II: Her Voice, the Studio D Story," http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/collection/film/?id=55937 (accessed April 14, 2010).
23. National Film Board of Canada, "*The Burning Times*," http://www.nfb.ca/film/burning_times/ (accessed April 15, 2010).

post-identity rhetoric that is so problematic at the current moment, where anything reminiscent of a strong, coalitional politics, is transformed through an individualistic focus, such as on the filmmakers themselves as women. Beyond just a technical problem with the way in which films are tagged for searching, there is a similarly noticeable absence online of the NFB's most important films dealing with sexuality, such as those from their "Gay & Lesbian Video Collection," compiled in 1994 of nine of such important films; on the English site, only one film, *Open Secrets* (2003), is available using the keyword search "homosexuality," and on the French site the situation is the much the same.

The Playlist labeled "Anti-Racist Films," raises similarly complex questions about how the institution chooses to remember its own past. Comprised exclusively of films from 1991 onwards, not one of the selected works addresses the Board's own early involvement with propaganda films promoting segregationist and assimilationist politics. Explicitly racist films, like *Of Japanese Descent: An Interim Report* (1945), a film made in collaboration with the Department of Labour that "represents evacuation and internment as the necessary relocation of Japanese Canadians to a healthier environment facilitating their improvement through assimilation"[24] is (not surprisingly) excluded. However, this omission, given the archival film's value to clearly reflect elements central to an understanding of Canadian history and society, functions as a convenient way to forget a traumatic event that the nation would prefer not to remember. While one can watch the 1975 film *Enemy Alien* online, which "tells the story of the frustration and injustice experienced by Japanese Canadians, who fought long and hard to be accepted as Canadians,"[25] and is doubtlessly an important film (all the more so for being produced 13 years before the government offered a formal apology and compensation for the atrocities committed in the name of security against Japanese Canadians), its inclusion on the site points to the sort of legacy that the NFB prefers to establish for itself, and by extension, for a popular national mythology uncomfortable about suggestions of its own colonialist and racist history.

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24. Christopher E. Gittings, *Canadian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 70.
25. National Film Board of Canada, "*Enemy Alien*," http://www.nfb.ca/film/enemy_alien/ (accessed April 15, 2010).

The 1962 film, *Drylanders*, by Don Haldane, is included on the online Screening Room, but its short description belies its larger contextual understanding as a colonial narrative "driven by white imperial ideology,"[26] which imagines the prairies as empty and waiting. The only indication of the existence of Native inhabitants is issued elliptically, in a short exchange wherein one of the white characters says, "This is no country for a white man." While it is anachronistic to expect a filmmaker in the 1960s to portray colonialism in the same manner one might today, its inclusion online could be better understood with greater contextual information, especially given the institution's increasing focus on the representation of First Nations and Inuit identities over the past twenty years. Despite the site's indication that the film has been streamed 1,744 times, and given a "thumbs up" 33 times, the comments section is completely empty at present.[27] The synopses for the majority of the films are typically quite brief, two or three sentences describing the film's subject and a link to download it or purchase the DVD. Some films are also accompanied by teaching resources for those looking to incorporate films into their curricula, but most tend to operate within an implicit understanding of the work's ability to "speak for itself. Albert Ohayon, one of the two collection experts responsible for curating the site, points to the fact that some of the most influential films have longer blog entries written about them, they are very rarely linked to the film's main page, signaling a lack of what John D. Jackson describes as the important "paper trail" by which archivists and researchers can better understand a particular work[28].

While the films suffer somewhat from this lack of context, there is hope among those responsible that the increased access and interactivity the site enables will foster greater community interest in the films. NFB chairperson Tom Perlmutter recently likened this feature to the old days of traveling projectionists, in that the site not only shows the films but also "engages the community in discussion." While it is certain that some are watching online films in groups, the screening room necessarily privileges a solitary viewing experience, and so it seems more likely that Perlmutter referring to the ability of viewers to add comments to a film's page, and thus engage in a dialog

26. Ibid, 15.
27. National Film Board of Canada, http://www.nfb.ca/film/drylanders/ (accessed April 14, 2010).
28. John D. Jackson, "Production, Preservation, and Access: The Struggle to Retain Audiovisual Archives," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 26, no. 2 (2001): 286.

regarding their reactions to a particular film. Even in some of the board's best known films though, comments are usually quite sparse, and as anyone familiar with sites such as Youtube knows, generally lacking in anything like interaction or discourse. Because you must first create an account in order to leave a comment, viewers tend to prefer to register their reactions by simply clicking the ubiquitous "like" icon underneath the video frame. Another significant issue in this regard is the inability for viewers to "talk across" the linguistic barrier imposed by the site's division between official languages. While it is now possible to search for an English title in the French site and vice versa, because the French and English versions of the films are not linked, the comments which appear in one do not show up in the other. This lack of any intersection between the two versions, which is never strictly addressed but nonetheless undergirds any interaction with the Screening Room and the NFB as a whole, compounds and reifies the clichéd and oversimplified understanding of Canada's "two solitudes," a term used to evoke the nation's French and English populations as completely divergent and autonomous entities.

The context and experience of online viewing raises important questions about the way in which viewers experience these films, as well as their subsequent understanding and engagement of the issues they portray. Commenting on the heyday of Studio D, where her mother Bonnie Sherr Klein worked as a filmmaker, author and activist Naomi Klein remembers how:

> [t]he discussions that would follow [the screenings] were most interesting. I would often not watch the films but go to the discussion. The spirit of that era of filmmaking [Studio D] was the idea that you make a film to start a discussion or conversation and that watching the film is a collective experience, a communal experience.[29]

29. Ezra Winton and Naomi Klein, foreword to *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, ed. Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker and Ezra Winton (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), xvii.

Technology and the Board

The fact that the heritage in question is "virtual," in that it is the digitized versions of (predominantly) celluloid film originals, uploaded onto the World Wide Web for viewing in a wide variety of settings around the world, necessarily complicates a more straightforward understanding of heritage as locally situated in a historical building or museum. The NFB's explicit enthusiasm for new media is grounded in an instrumentalist understanding of technology as essentially neutral, a passive receptacle in the aid of wider dissemination and efficiency; an understanding I seek to trouble. While the new Screening Room marks a significant ramping up of their outreach efforts, the NFB has been involved with the pioneering use of new film technology and distribution methods since its inception. Under Grierson's leadership, films were exhibited "by creating an alternative network using itinerant projectionists, 16mm film prints and … venues such as community halls and church basements;"[30] NFB filmmakers in the late 1960s were among the first to embrace new technologies such as IMAX, portable video, and community access filmmaking cooperatives.[31] But it was not until the successive budget cuts of the mid-1990s, coupled with the increasing availability of digital technologies and the Internet, that they began to concentrate their efforts so intensively on dissemination, opening the CineRobotheque in Montreal in 1992. [32] After the cuts of 1996, the NFB attempted to establish a larger audience through an ill-fated move into television, where filmmakers found they needed to conform to the standards of the medium in ways that stifled their ability to take risks.[33] Ten years after CineRobotheque opened its doors, a similar centre, the NFB Mediatheque, was established in downtown Toronto in 2002. In January 2008, they NFB launched "one of Canada's first e-cinema networks,"[34] the digital transmission of films via high-speed Internet connection for screening in Canada's

30. R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989), 97.
31. Ibid, 18.
32. National Film Board of Canada, "The NFB CineRobotheque Welcomes Its Millionth Visitor!" http://www.onf-nfb.gc.ca/eng/press-room/press-releases.php?id=13462 (accessed April 6, 2010). Here visitors can choose from 10,000 NFB films to watch either on-site or at home. The centre houses a cinema, personal viewing stations, and last but not least, Ernest the robot, a towering cybernetic mosquito who tirelessly retrieves whatever film you have requested from the multimedia catalogue.
33. Hays, "To NFB or Not to NFB," http://www.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2009.03-NFB-national-film-board-seventieth-birthday/2/ (accessed April 14, 2010).
34. National Film Board of Canada, *NFB Strategic Plan*, 15.

more remote and underserved communities. These initiatives, combined with the NFB's more traditional distribution strategies through their website and telephone ordering, as well as public screenings at cinemas and festivals, and their perennial popularity with school boards and community groups, comprised the whole of the NFB's dissemination up until its latest incarnation in the online Screening Room.

The NFB's history of distribution-oriented strategizing, up to and including the new Screening Room and ancillary applications, is an extension of what Maurice Charland describes as "technological nationalism."[35] Expanding upon Harold Innis' influential distinction between space-binding and time-binding media,[36] a theory that refers to a given culture's prioritization of media that are either lightweight and transportable through great distances (space-binding), or those able to survive and communicate through history (time-binding), Charland expands upon the implications encoded in the technologies which have served a nation-building function in Canadian history. For Innis, time or space-binding biases are mutually exclusive, as the space-binding medium is ephemeral and thus susceptible to the ravages of time, while the time-binding medium is heavy and fixed geographically in space. In Canada, a country of massive distances, Innis argues, the priority has tended to be on space-binding media, often to the detriment of questions of communication through history, an assertion that Charland further fleshes out in his description of technological nationalism. Using the examples from the history of both transportation and broadcasting technologies in Canada, Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) respectively, Charland effectively argues that (Anglophone) Canada is founded on a paradox: in its quest to locate a national identity through the unifying potential of greater communication through technology, the technologies themselves come to stand in for national identity itself. For Charland, "this vision of the nation is bankrupt…because it provides no substance or commonality for the *polis* except communication itself."[37] This rhetoric functions to legitimate a "sovereign united Canada within the discursive field of parliamentary government, and as an *inducement* for those in Canada to see

35. Maurice Charland, "Technological Nationalism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory / Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale* 10, no. 1-2 (1986): 196.
36. Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
37. Charland, "Technological Nationalism," 198.

themselves as Canadian."[38] As Innis observes, space-binding technologies work to extend power and foster empire, but usually at the cost of an engagement with historical knowledge. As such, institutional histories such as the CPR's become mythologized in the national imaginary, precluding a deeper understanding with the railway's role in the perpetuation of a colonialist agenda, violence against indigenous communities, and exploitation of immigrant labourers, to name but a few examples. Charland likewise argues that technological nationalism, such as that of broadcasting systems, "establish dominions of power…[and] promote the cultural dependency of margins,"[39] drawing attention to the ideological function of how the "margins" (those outside of the privileged group), work to both consolidate and strengthen that dominant group's self-perception.

While his argument makes an important contribution to an understanding of Canada's media environment, Charland implicitly and problematically privileges a more "organic" or "authentic" type of identity and nationalism which is untainted by the stain of technology. His singling out of Anglophone Canada for critique necessarily raises the question as to whether it is in fact French Canada, or Quebec specifically, that participates in a more "traditional" or genuine experience of nation-building, an implication with troublingly essentialist undertones which also fails to take into consideration the way in which, for better or worse, technology itself becomes culture. As Barney argues, in a manner reminiscent of arguments regarding the seemingly neutral politics of heritage, the politics of technology are disconcerting precisely because they are overlooked or dismissed as only instrumental concerns, "generally exempt from democratic political judgment" and as such, "can be mobilized in order to remove other, non-technological controversies from the sphere of democratic political judgment."[40] Bearing this in mind, technological nationalism provides a useful lens through which to analyze the NFB's long engagement with, and prioritization of, technological innovation as a marker of its cultural importance. While the Screening Room bears all the markers of a space-binding technology through its capacity to unify great distances through the Internet, its content is comprised of works from the nation's past, rendering its

38. Charland, 200.
39. Ibid, 216.
40. Darin Barney "The Culture of Technology in Canada," *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens*. Winter (2007): 28.

categorization as one or the other more problematic. However, given the overdetermined and presentist manner in which the films are framed, the site nonetheless functions in such a manner as to evade the more reflective interaction with history characteristic of time-binding technologies; in its relatively superficial engagement with the past through a rhetoric of technological progress, strategies like the online Screening Room are more reflective of the space-binding bias of technological nationalism.

This is not to advocate nostalgically for an impossible return to a pre-internet viewing experience, nor to say that one necessarily precludes the other, only to highlight how the collective experience of film viewing, and its effects, is something that is increasingly sidelined in the NFB's distribution strategies. This is not unique to them, the film industry at large is moving from a focus on the public to a private viewing experience; however, if the films' relevance is explicitly tied to its ability to generate discussion and foster greater understanding of "Canadians," how effective can a solitary viewing experience be? If, following Nelson, we are to consider

> the power of representation as an active generative force of racial identity and an historically colonial cultural activity in the West, we must consider not only the image itself, but also the active engagement of the image by a viewing audience,[41]

then we must likewise take the space of encounter with representation, not just the representation itself, into consideration.

The trajectory of the NFB's initiatives reflects a broader societal and political engagement with identity politics as one-dimensional: *CFC/SN* was more explicitly concerned with questions of class; Studio D with the status of (mostly white, middle-class) women; and *Reel Diversity* nearly exclusively with race. An understanding of identification as intersectional, while sometimes explicit and evident in a great number of their actual films, has not penetrated the rigid parameters of the NFB's programming, and this is problematic as their output thus seems especially vulnerable to the contingencies and social agendas of shifting governments and society at large. Druick describes the now defunct *Reel Diversity* program as operating in a similarly rigid manner:

41. Camille A. Nelson and Charmaine A. Nelson, eds., introduction to *Racism, Eh? A Critical Inter-Disciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada* (Concord, Ontario: Captus Press Inc., 2004), 9-10.

> [As the NFB's] … latest strategy for attracting 'marginal' citizens to make films about their experiences, continuing to reinscribe Canadian 'others' on film, limiting their potential for interrogations of identity to a strictly visible, racial engagement… without examining the *causes* of racism or issues of transnational migration, or the way in which racial difference and multicultural discourse function for dominant groups of white Canadians.[42]

Instead of expanding or diversifying initiatives once they are understood as outdated or solipsistic, these programs are simply shut down under a rhetoric of "mission accomplished," which in turn leads to the problematic and premature assumption that we are somehow "beyond" such identity politics.

Presently, the policies of the NFB are most deeply enmeshed in the discourse of official multiculturalism espoused by the federal government, which is certainly "not without its challenges and controversies."[43] Himani Bannerji, writing about the official discourse of multiculturalism in terms of women of colour in Canada, describes it as a "device for constructing and ascribing political subjectivities and agencies for those who are seen as legitimate and full citizens and those who are peripheral to this in many senses."[44] Multiculturalism, often confused with antiracism, works through a "political discourse of assimilation which keeps the so-called immigrants in place through a constantly deferred promise."[45] Official multiculturalism sets apart the immigrants of colour from the privileged understanding of Canada's English and French populations as "founders," alternately using the (greatly decimated and oppressed) presence of First Nations People and Canada's "mosaic" approach to diversity as evidence with which to claim a cultural distinction from the United States.[46] This organization brings into clearer focus the primary national imaginary of Canada, which "rests on posing 'Canadian

42. Druick, *Projecting Canada*, 175-76.
43. Nelson and Nelson, *Racisim, Eh?*, 396.
44. Himani Bannerji, introduction to *The Dark Side of the Nation* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2000), 6.
45. Ibid, 9.
46. Ibid, 8. "This mosaic approach has not been compensated with an integrative politics of antiracism or of class struggle which is sensitive to the racialization involved in Canadian class formation."

culture' against 'multicultures.'"[47] The binary relationship functions through an implicit relationship to whiteness as an invisible marker of difference. As Anderson notes in the related context of the now defunct Studio D, "Do images of diversity – what may be termed an aestheticized multiculturalism – substitute for the difficulties of actually working through and debating differences?"[48]

Another function of the multicultural construction of national identity which is reflected in the NFB's online Screening Room is its division into French and English sites; while a logical extension of their distinct and divided history at the Board itself, this split perpetuates the long-held "framework that privileges the British and French as the normative and founding identities of Canada."[49] Furthermore, given the often fraught and unresolved tension in the ongoing relationship of Anglophone and Francophone Canada, it is regrettable that the site makes no effort to talk across this caesura, glossing over the historical struggles and the constitutive role of the NFB's French section in the sovereignty movement with a narrative of equivalence that works to foreclose greater engagement.

The increased exposure and emphasis on preservation signaled by the NFB's online initiatives offer the unrealized potential for a greater awareness and understanding of the institution's important legacy, as well as the nation's own complex engagements with difference. However, as Baker asserts, "the history of the [NFB] … is at risk unless there is a coordinated effort to preserve the films *and* the stories behind the films – not just posting them online for viewing."[50] Without a more reflexive and responsible relationship with its own collection, the NFB risks negating its role as an active stakeholder in Canada's cultural heritage, regrettably shifting "from being a dynamic part of the process of imagining Canadian society to an archive of government in the welfare state."[51]

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47. Ibid, 10
48. Elizabeth Anderson, "Studio D's Imagined Community: From Development (1974) to Realignment (1986-1990)," in *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema*, ed. Kay Armatage (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 55.
49. Nelson and Nelson, *Racism, Eh?*, 396.
50. Michael Brendan Baker, e-mail message to author, April 12, 2010.
51. Druick, *Projecting Canada*, 183.

After the budget cuts to the arts by the Federal Government in 2008, one reporter from the *Montreal Gazette* speculated that "The National Film Board is being starved into submission." By relegating the NFB's significance to an increasingly disembodied and technologically innovative heritage provider, it becomes more difficult to argue for its contemporary relevance as an institution mandated to create films of significance to Canadians as opposed to just their distributor. If preservation and accessibility are being largely determined by popularity, palatability, budget constraints, and their affinity with the current government's agenda, then the NFB's vast collection, and Canadian film preservation in general, is at risk of creating a solipsistic and anachronistic "*living memory*" for Canadians, one that fails to acknowledge the Board's own complicated and sometimes complicit history with the overarching structures of state power, as well as ongoing social issues. Despite the self-congratulatory tone struck by the Online Screening Room, and that of the current government more generally, [52] these legacies continue to haunt the present.

52. For example, Prime Minister Harper's problematic statement that "Canada has no history of colonialism." David Ljunggren, "Every G20 nation wants to be Canada, insists PM," http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/26/columns-us-g20-canada-advantages-idUSTRE58P05Z20090926 (accessed May 5, 2011).

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