NARRATIVE FLEXIBILITY OR NOT? Motifs of labour, progress and citizenship in the representation of Indigenous people in the films of the NFB

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ABSTRACT

The start of the Second World War saw the birth of a Canadian Institution that to this day asserts a cultural presence that is provocative in its production of stories that speak to the nation of Canada. Much has changed particularly with regards to both Indigenous representation in the content of the films as well as who is producing the films with that content. Through the motifs of labour, progress, and citizenship, as they appear and reappear over 70 years of image making, the flexibility of the NFB to bend or even break national narratives will be explored through a journey that will take us from 1946 to 2008. Documentaries of the Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin along with the work of the young Mohawk filmmaker Reaghan Tarbell will be compared to films made about Indigenous people prior to arrival of Obomsawin at the NFB. Obomsawin was hired at the NFB in 1967 a time when Canada was maturing as a country and starting to consider its identity through the diversity of its people - Immigrant, Anglophone, Francophone and Native. At this time, the foundation that Grierson built the NFB on - documentary as propaganda in the service of nation-building - was being critiqued by filmmakers who wanted to move beyond films themed on citizenship to films that problematized the narratives promoted in the documentaires during the war and after in the Post-War period. Grierson believed in propaganda as a way to educate Canadians about shared values. People like Obomsawin also believed in education but of a sort that could potentially clash with the mythology of Canada the nation-state. Citizenship was challenged by Indigenous sovereignty. Canada, as a country that valued tolerance and human rights, was challenged by the history of residential schools and the reserve system. Was/is the NFB equipped to handle telling the stories of a young nation?

KEYWORDS

film, documentary, propaganda, Indigenous, nation state, nation building, sovereignty, Indigenous, citizenship, progress, labour

In a NFB film from 1955, a young man from the Prairies returns home to visit his family. As he walks up to his mother we see that he is dressed in military uniform. The camera cuts to a shot, cropped close, of his badges. The viewer can determine he is serving in Canada's air force. The film is only ten minutes long but in that time we learn a lot about Tom Prince, the subject of the film, and the world he lives in - a Canada that is rapidly growing and transforming as Post-War industry takes hold. The production falls inline with the style that the NFB was producing at that time taking cues from the films produced over a decade prior in the 1940s. During the war, the newly constructed NFB produced work that was intended to "inspire" and "encourage" Canadians to be "part of the war effort" with projects like *Canada Carries On.* (NFB Blog 2014) The series focused on the homefront delivering content on "what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do their best by Canada and themselves." (Grierson, 1966: 27) The films leveraged the industrial spirit sweeping across the country showcasing Canadians at work.

After the fall of Nazism and the end of World War II NFB films switched focus from leveraging the population of Canada for the war effort to engaging the population to consider citizenship and what it meant to belong and contribute to the nation of Canada. (Druick, 2007: 103) Screenings of the documentary films provided a young country an opportunity to learn about who it was. In the spirit of John Grierson, the films of the NFB were "propaganda" in the service of education (Grierson, 1966: 243). Grierson was the Scotsman whom the Canadian Government put into place as a film commissioner to oversee the national project of leveraging film as a medium to mobilize a country at war as well as solidify Canadian identity. (Druick, 2007: 42) After the war Grierson was no longer at the NFB, having been "implicated in the Gouzenko Affair, which was considered the first spy scandal of the cold war" (Druick, 2007: 18) but the influence of his theories on film as a way to connect a country using propaganda that promoted national values like "tolerance" and "respect for fundamental rights" (Grierson, 1966: 226) continued on.

In the footage of Tom Prince returning back to his prairie home we can see the NFB's formulaic propaganda promoting good citizenship play out as he gathers with his family and then with local community leaders at a meeting house. The footage goes on to show men in the service of the country in enterprising positions in resource based industries like fish and lumber as well as construction and the booming steel industry. The footage also goes on to show men (and a

small number of women) working in professional capacities in education, science, healthcare and law. The film is not so unlike *Back to Jobs* (view film), an NFB film released immediately after the war. Here we see men (and again only a few women) in the service of the country and hear the narrator's voice speak in an authoritative and paternalistic 'Voice of God' style to the importance of Canada mobilizing veterans returning from the war to be "productive citizens for the reconstruction and prosperity of Canada." (NFB Blog, 2014) We see a parade of men working jobs in construction ("new opportunities for the returned man") resource extraction like mining and forestry ("the minerals to maintain Canada's needs") as well as professional careers requiring university educations ("executives of all kind"). There is no individual we follow at this time but certainly the message is the same - citizens' stories of labour as a way to strengthen national cohesion.

There is one striking difference though between the two productions filmed almost a decade a part. In the 1955 film, Tom Prince along with the other people featured in the film are native. At that time, unless he was enfranchised giving up his status as an Indian, he would not have had the right to vote in the country that was claiming him and his labour as part of the national project of progress. The film, titled *Return of the Indian* (view film) , ends with the narrator filling in the supposed sentiments of Prince, pronouncing:

> No longer vanishing my people now, they grow yearly in numbers, and as they slowly regain their lost pride and hope, all Canada will gain from its original citizens. (McLean, 1955)

The film positioned the Indigenous population living within Canada's borders as part of the body politic of Canada as a nation-state. As a film it was meant to be forward thinking, even implicating the coming of the "white man" as the original problem that lead to a massive decrease in population, land and natural resources as well as mobility restriction due to the reserve system. The narrator, speaking as Prince, announces:

> Then came the white man with his axes and his ploughs and his guns and he leveled the forests and broke the plains and killed off most of the game. And the ways of the father would no longer sustain my people. They had to change to the white man's ways or die.

Further on the narrator declares:

> But most of us are willing to forget the past and travel the road ahead.

Similar words are pronounced in *Back to Jobs* as we hear narrator proclaim “in the joy of reunion there is no concern for the past but tomorrow and in the months to come these veterans must find their places in the life of Canada” For Grierson, looking back in the rear-view mirror to the pain of the past, served no one. Industrialization and the mobilization of a population in service of economic progress would be Canada’s saving grace both during and after the war. This attitude clings to the films of the NFB from that era. For example, in *Return of the Indian* we are introduced to the work of the Mohawk ironworkers with dizzying shots of cranes and men labouring amongst the skeletons of skyscrapers:

> In the new forests, the steel forests, you will find my people, the men of the Caughnawaga band, among the best structural steel workers in the world.

In the decade after the production of *Return of the Indian* the NFB released *High Steel* (view film). (Owen, 1965) In this ‘documentary’ we see again the a variation on the theme of the ‘Indian’ man in service of ‘progress.’ The focus of the film is one of the Mohawk ironworkers from Caughnawaga, which was the anglicized name that the reserve of Kahnawake was called at the time. (Tarbell, 2008) *High Steel* picks up where *Return of the Indian* left off in an effort to showcase the ‘progress’ Indigenous people in Canada had made. The subject of the film, who remains nameless and feels more like a composite character rather than an actual human being, narrates with a Brooklyn enhanced inflection:

> Ask anyone and they will tell you “those Indians are damn good ironworkers.”

Gritty shots of construction sites with muscle-bound men sweating in the dust as they brazenly smoke on the job are interwoven with bucolic views of Kahnawake which show a sleepy little village in Quebec where everyone knows each other and children play without worry. The depictions certainly don’t meet with the stereotype one might have had of a reserve. The formula of these films are an example of the lingering impact of Grierson on the NFB and his belief that documentary film, a term he coined and a genre he was internationally renowned for (Grierson, 1966: 32), was best served as propaganda in the service of nation building. In both films Indigenous people are absorbed into the mythology of Canada, neatly and with emphasis on professional contribution and commercial production. There is no indication that there may be a different narrative lingering just below the friendly facade. Despite the warm feelings of

pride and progress that the films desire to convey there is a haunting echo of the words of the infamous Indian Agent Duncan Campbell Scott:

> Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic. (FN Caring Society, 2016: 3)

No doubt, from the perspective of Grierson and the NFB these types of films were in line with his foundational vision for the organization:

> The main thing is to see the National Film Board plan as a service to the Canadian public, as an attempt to create a better understanding of Canada's present and as an aid to the people mobilizing their imagination and energy in the creating of the Canada of the future. (Grierson, 1966: 28)

Perhaps, at the time of their completion, the films were seen as honourable presentations of Canada as a new nation. Here though, in these films, citizenship as tied to progress in a Post-War world economy, is 'documented' without being problematized. Watching these films, with 50+ years of evolution in the way documentaries are produced, it is hard to view these works as documentary as we now understand the genre. Rather, with the benefit of hindsight, they seem more appropriately situated in the genre of propaganda - *exclusively.*

One could argue that what was happening here could be described as what Eve Tuck and Y. Wayne Yang refer to as "settler moves to innocence." Tuck and Yang in their formidable text "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" articulate that these types of moves:

> are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. (Tuck & Yang, 2012: 10)

If Indigenous people were presented as welcomed and necessary participants in the cause of building a young country discussions regarding land appropriation, abuse of children at residential schools, loss of language and culture become relegated to a frozen moment in the past, an endnote in a history book that can be closed and placed back on the shelf. Indigenous people, as the NFB promoted in their mid-century propaganda, were there in service for the greater national good, and to reiterate what 'Tom Prince' purportedly pronounced "willing to forget the past and travel the road ahead." (McLean, 1955) The nation will support those who

work hard and who choose not to turn their gaze back to the past only advancing forward into the future - without question. As long as the population committed itself to the Post-War program and operated as good citizens it was implied, by the films produced by the NFB at that time, that everything would be fine.

What would happen though if a crack were to split open that myth? What if the voice speaking out from the reel told us something contradictory?

In 1997, a NFB film introduces us to Randy Horne, an ironworker. The documentary is titled *Spudwrench - A Kahnawake Man* (view film). (Obomsawin, 1997) In one of the opening scenes a group of men are speaking around a table in a kitchen. The men take turns sharing how they came to be ironworkers. Some of the men are young just starting out in their careers, others are older and closer to retirement. The film cuts from the kitchen to other scenes of older and younger men talking about the structures they worked on - the Chase Manhattan Bank, the World Trade Centre, the Brooklyn Bridge. A retired ironworker says:

> Every job was [sic] Indians working on these buildings and bridges.

As the film continues the men share about the dangers of working in the construction industry.

> Years back, before the safety really come [sic] in strong, they used to work open floors.

We hear about the friends and family they have seen injured or killed on site.

> You see things...some are very, very unpleasant...I had the bad luck to be on the same job when my son fell...it's not a nice experience.

They also share the difficulty of spending many years working away from home, most having worked long term on jobs in New York City.

> It's a hard life to live. To be away from your family all the time.

For these men:

> This is our family. We're our family. All *Kahnawakeronon* [people of Kahnawake].

Occasionally the voice of a woman is heard. She is asking the men about their experiences. As the men laugh we hear her laugh along. The voice is of the director, Alanis Obomsawin, an Indigenous filmmaker who came to work at the NFB in 1967.

Visual echoes of *High Steel* are seen as the film cuts to the community in Kahnawake. The sleepy village makes an appearance again 30 years later. Children are playing lacrosse. We hear the voice of the director as she stops in the street to speak to Kahnawake resident Marie Mayo standing beside her garden. The camera does a close-up pan of Marie's flowerbed. We hear birds chirping and ambient sounds from the community beyond her home. In more scenes the camera pauses to introduce us to other neighbours. The retired ironworker proclaims:

> Right here in Kahnawake. That's the only thing we have left. We will never give it up.

The first half of the documentary focuses on introducing the viewer to the community along with their culture. At certain points in the film we are brought into the Longhouse where songs and teachings are shared. The mood is light and friendly then mid-point the film switches focus. We learn about the tragedy of the collapse of the Quebec Bridge in 1907. Kahnawake men whose labour was given in service to the provincial construction project, were killed in the collapse. We hear the retired steelworker's voice speak about what happened.

> The men, a lot of *Kahnawakeronon*, 36 of them had perished.

That day Kahnawake lost almost their entire population of men at the labour force age. The weight of the steel trapped them in the water at high tide. The film then goes on to introduce the story of how ironwork came to Kahnawake. It was during the 1860 construction of the Victoria Bridge that would link Montreal to Saint-Lambert that the knack the Mohawk men had for scaling heights with no fear was discovered.

> The Mohawks had been engaged in hauling stone by river barges of Kahnawake to the bridge site. While on top of the structure of the bridge they got around the steel so good. They were not afraid of height. The superintendent saw what and [sic] how they were getting along on steel. They were then hired to learn how to become an ironworker.

The men, their labour and the history of industrial progress, as it impacted the community of Kahnawake, are motifs that Obomsawin builds on in this film and then references again in

Rocks at Whiskey Trench (view film) released in 2000. For Obomsawin though, these motifs are no longer yoked to propaganda in support of nation-building. A third of the way in, the documentary clearly strays from Grierson's formula with an abrupt change. The camera cuts to a bloody and beaten Randy Horne. This family man that we have come to know earlier on in the film, along with his wife and granddaughter, is in a state of trauma. Here Obomsawin exposes the crack in the facade. The myth has been splintered. We hear the voice of Randy Horne utter through scraped lips "they jumped me."

> "Keep your mouth shut." I started yelling. And they started beating me with something on the head. About 25 times. There was a few guys holding me down.

The beating occurred at a reserve not far from Kahnawake. He would go on to physically heal but decades later the communities in both reserves still struggle to come to terms with what took place the summer of 1990 a year that is marked, in the history of Canada, as one not easily forgotten. A small Québec village became internationally known when it's name was linked to a land dispute between the people of the town of Oka and the neighbouring reserve, Kanesatake. At the centre of what became known as the Oka Crisis was the desire to expand a golf course and develop condominiums on the area referred to as the Pines by the *Kanien'keha:ka* (Mohawk) of Kanesatake. The Pines is a sacred site with burial grounds of their ancestors. No consultation with the residents of Kanesatake was conducted. The Mayor of Oka announced that the expansion would proceed. A group of Kanesatake citizens and supporters from other local reserves including Kahnawake took up presence in the Pines, setting up a road blockade and a camp to protect the trees and the burial sites. (Canadian Encyclopedia) What happened that summer has become a source of national shame. The narrative of Canada, as a nation that prided itself on inclusion and support of human rights, was shattered in such a way that it would no longer be easy for Canadians to assume all was well with Indigenous people and that the nation-building project was proceeding according to plan.

Obomsawin produced a series of documentaries that offered a critical investigation into what happened during the Oka Crisis. Her first, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (view film) was produced only a few years following the crisis in 1993. *My Name is Kahentiiosta* (view film) was produced in 1995, *Spudwrench - Kahnawake Man* in 1997 and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* in 2000. In each of them voices from many of the different stakeholders express their opinions and

reflections about the events. In *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (Obomsawin, 2000) Obomsawin interviews a man from Châteauguay, the neighbouring town to Kahnawake. During the Oka crisis the town became divided on support for its Mohawk neighbours, a community that spent much of its earnings in the shops at Châteauguay financially benefiting the town with their business. In a show of solidarity with those at Kanehsatake who were under threat of invasion by the Canadian Armed Forces, some members of Kahnawake blocked the Mercier bridge. The bridge is part of the route that leads back and forth to Montreal. Tensions heightened between Kahnawake and the citizens of Châteauguay. Reflecting on that moment, the man sits on rock with the seaway behind him.

> Anytime there is something they don't like they go for the bridge. The bridge wasn't built by the Indians! It was us Québécois that built that bridge.

Despite over a century of Mohawk labour and contribution to the local transportation infrastructure with projects like Victoria Bridge, Quebec Bridge, and Mercier Bridge once the members of Kahnawake asserted their citizenship and sovereignty as *Kanien'kéha* people the state and Canadian citizens turned on them. As the man from Châteauguay speaks, Obomsawin documents the evidence of the deliberate erasure. This is only one such moment. In her extensive body of work she documents many more. In response to his error she cuts to a Mohawk man speaking about how he and his brother along with others in the community worked on the Mercier Bridge. She then inserts her own voice to fill in the rest of the facts including the appropriation of surrounding Mohawk land by the government of Quebec in order to expand the local transportation infrastructure. At that time, some of the people of Kahnawake lost their homes.

Back and forth throughout the film she places us in the chaos of Mercier Bridge as women, children and the elderly are evacuated from Kahnawake due to the fear of an invasion by the Canadian Armed Forces. On August 28 the blockade on Mercier is opened up temporarily to let them through. Québec Police are there to 'protect' them but as the footage shows not much was done to stop the people who showed up on the other side to pummel the cars with stones. *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* focuses on the people that were injured and traumatized by the experience of Canadian citizens reacting with such active hatred towards them.

These films are nothing like the ‘documentaries’ on Indigenous people from the Grierson era and the ensuing decade that came after. Obomsawin’s films may appear to subtly slip in the motifs of labour, progress and citizenship but then she flips it all inside out. We are caught off guard. Her documentaries can become messy, not easily contained, painful to witness and sometimes the viewer may be confused as to what side they should be on. No easy answers are offered. Obomsawin’s films confront the narrative of earlier NFB productions on the problematics of speaking about the importance of citizenship to people whose sovereignty is being denied. In her documentaries citizenship is redefined. We are introduced to people like the proud *Kanien'keha:ka* from Kahnawake who despite a history of mistreatment by the government of Canada and Canadians citizens show a willingness to sit at the table to negotiate in order to find peaceful resolutions.

Towards the end of *Spudwrench: A Kahnawake Man* the camera trails Randy Horne as he scales the steel frame of a future building. We hear his voice say:

> You try to forget about the bad things. Just start living your life again. Provide for your family and stuff. That’s what I try to do...keep on living.

This is not the voice of a man speaking about moving forward with the goal of being a productive Canadian. This is the voice of man speaking through the memory of a trauma he does not want to relive again. He wants to get back to the predictable routine of being a labourer as well as a family man. Is Obomsawin’s inclusion of these words a deliberate echoing of the ‘moving forward’ message of films of the past in an effort to subvert? Her films document people like the man who came to be known as Spudwrench during the Oka Crisis in order to ensure that people will not forget or erase history. What kind of forces were at play that enabled Obomsawin to make such a dramatic departure from the documentary legacy of Grierson?

What had changed?

Well, it was the 60s.

Two years after the release of *High Steel* with its lingering jingoistic tone the NFB produced *Indian Memento* (view film). (Régnier, 1967)

This film was less of a documentary bordering more on the edge of an art film in the experimental, psychedelic mood that Expo ‘67 was infusing into Montreal in the time leading up to the World’s Fair and the Centennial of Canada’s Confederation. The film opens with mountain landscapes then cuts to a lumber yard then onto a church and houses set within the shadow of the mountains. There are domestic scenes of an middle-aged woman sewing and then young women gathering laundry off of a clothing line while children play in the background. Beautiful rural countryside is interspersed with scenes of men cutting wood at the lumber yard. These scenes, with their emphasis on men, resources, and labour are reminiscent of the *Back to Jobs (1946)*, *Return of the Indian (1956)*, and *High Steel (1965)*. One main difference though is that this time there is no ‘voice-of-god’ narrator. In fact there is no narration imposing the assumed voice of the subject, only an ambiguous soundtrack of music without any words. We become aware that the focus of the film is a young Indigenous woman. It is with this film that we see a dramatic break with the formulaic structure that previous NFB documentaries utilized. No longer do we see the obvious impact of Grierson’s ideas about documentary. The emphasis on educating the audience about other people and other places in Canada is there (Grierson, 1966: 248) but without the authoritative and paternalistic voice.

At one point the film abruptly cuts to the woman now separated from the scenes of the rolling hills and lush foliage we first find her in. We discover she is at the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo and we can deduce she is one of the hostesses. Art historian and curator Ruth Phillips has said that the “Indians of Canada Pavilion constituted a moment of dramatic rupture with many key conventions of colonialist representation.” (Capela-Laborde, 2010: 3) As the film takes us inside the Pavilion indications of this are noticed. We follow the woman watching her as she addresses the crowds entering into the space. We are not able to hear her words only the haunting music that sounds lonely and foreboding. Amongst archival images of children at residential schools we also see contemporary images of Indigenous people looking happy in the workplace but the music and the words of the text panels confuse the narrative. As the footage pans around the room we read:

> Wars and Peace Treaties deprived us of our land.
>
> We wanted to live our own life on our own land.
>
> The White Man’s school is an alien land for an Indian child.

> An Indian child begins school by learning a foreign tongue.

The shots of the crowd show people with solemn expressions moving through the panels. No doubt, this is the first time some of them are being confronted by Indigenous histories and realities. It is a simple technique but the incorporation of the text panels speaks volumes as to how different the narrative is now. No longer is the story one of forgetting and moving on with acceptance of the colonial status quo. The space inside of the Pavilion is clearly curated to educate Canadians about how the history of colonialism has impacted Indigenous people. The technique introduced in this film creates a space of agency uncharacteristic of the type of documentaries produced by the NFB before. In *Return of the Indian*, from 1955, we heard:

> On the reserves where he had placed us the White Man tried to help. And the Indian tried to learn. The White Man's intentions were good. But good intentions are not always enough.

This time no words of excuse are heard. This time no "settler move to innocence" is provided.

Also, in the 1960s the NFB's mandate had changed.

> The new mandate reflected the shift in politics from the earlier period of Canadian citizenship discourse which had been organized around eugenics, white settler nation building, and immigrant assimilation, to one built around the emergence of identity politics and the New Left. Quebec politics, First Nations politics, women's politics, and new immigration policies brought about a new array of social policies through which the state increased its governmental reach, administering and representing citizens with renewed vigour. (Druick, 2007: 126)

This was the break that ushered in the NFB as it has come to be known - a government organization that values alternative voices that problematize and redress hegemonic narratives. It is at this time, approaching and proceeding the Centennial year that we see an incredible amount of growth at the NFB and *narrative flexibility*. What we witness in films like *Indian Memento* as well as the Challenge for Change films *PowWow at Duck Lake*[1] (view film) and *You*

[1] *PowWow at Duck Lake* was produced in 1967. In this documentary we see First Nations and Metis people as well as white male government officials coming up to the mic at a community gathering to speak about their frustrations with the Canadian government around Indigenous representation. The things we hear are frank with no holds barred and included abuse at residential schools and how the residential school system is not providing Indigenous students with what they require to be able to apply and attend university. The opening scenes include shots of the exhibit panels from the Indians of Canada Pavilion, making a visual connection to *Indian Memento*.

Are on Indian Land[2] (view film) are the bending of the narrative constrictions that were established during Grierson's reign. A space had now opened up for someone like Obomsawin to come in and begin her own project of education.

For many Indigenous people, in the films of Obomsawin they see themselves. Mohawk curator Steve Loft writes:

> When I first saw *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, I was awestruck by the film's ability to relate to me on an emotional and cognitive level. What did I feel? Anger? Pride? Bitterness? Certainly all of these things, but even more, I felt the voice of a nation, the voice of a people, my voice. Not in some kind of abstract, pan-Indian or oppressed sense, but a passionate voice, a voice of struggle and the voice of "all my relations." (Loft, 2010: 25)

Obomsawin's influence on generations of artists and activists as well as cultural and political provocateurs cannot be underestimated. It is said that "Alanis Obomsawin has brilliantly de-whitened Canadian documentary traditions in her forty years with the National Film Board of Canada." (Findlay, 2013: 228) In the years between Obomsawin's start at the NFB to the present moment there has been a tremendous growth in Indigenous produced films at the Board. We have gone from the jingoistic and patronizing style of *Return of the Indian* to a plethora of documentaries that complicate the motifs of labour, progress and citizenship.

In the space that Obomsawin has created, young Indigenous filmmakers build on her legacy. *In Little Caughnawaga: To Brooklyn and Back* (view film) (Tarbell, 2008) Mohawk filmmaker Reaghan Tarbell brings us back to Kahnawake - her home community. The voices heard coming from the reel this time privilege Indigenous women. The viewer is encouraged to "delve into the Mohawk community in this feature-length documentary about the steel workers who hold a special place in North American history." She takes us on a journey back and forth between Kahnawake and Brooklyn in order to achieve a deeper investigation into the Mohawk

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[2] *You Are on Indian Land* was produced in 1969. The documentaries in this series were created by filmmakers trained by NFB staff on how to produce their own films. In effect the NFB was capacity building with communities that were being underserved in the area of access to the tools of cultural production. Mohawk filmmaker Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell produced *You Are on Indian Land*, a documentary on a blockade organized by members of his community of St. Regis (the Canadian name given to the reserve of Akwesasne) and demonstrators who joined from the neighbouring reserves of Kanesatake and Kahnawake. The film footage documents a heated clash with the police and the arresting of demonstrators including women and children. The police, from Cornwall, are the illegal trespassers here with no jurisdiction on the territory. *You Are on Indian Land* was the precursor of what was to come with the films of Obomsawin that would soon follow.

ironworkers and their families. During the journey we learn about the pride the community has for its industrial history and “the iconic New York skyline, with all its monuments to modernity, is the fruit of their labour.”

Tarbell uses the story of her grandmother, as shared by her and her aunties, to illustrate the ties the community of Kahnawake had to the area of Brooklyn that was referred to as Little Caughnawaga. As the NFB description reads:

> While the men were scraping the skies, the women had their feet firmly on the ground, sustaining a vibrant community in the heart of Brooklyn.

We are reminded of scenes in *High Steel* but this time the viewer is shown more. As authour Zoë Druick points out in *Projecting Canada* “films made under the influence of Grierson are concerned with anonymous individuals who are typical of particular population or occupation groups.” (Druick, 2007: 49) Tarbell’s documentary fleshes out the people *High Steel* references but never names. Touching on the motifs of labour, progress and citizenship in the *Kanien'keha:ka* nation we learn about the many generations who travelled back and forth over the border in pursuit of employment. We even learn that her grandmother was a welder during the Second World War. One of her aunties declares:

> My mother was, I would say, the boss. But I think a lot of the Indian women were kind of the boss.

Due to the presence of filmmakers like Obomsawin and Tarbell the NFB has travelled far since its inception in 1939 at the start of the War. Perhaps it is this quality of narrative flexibility that has contributed to its endurance. Interestingly, Grierson’s mandate of documentary film in the service of national education is still present. With the of inclusion of other voices along the way what we hear coming from the reel now is more accurate to the stories of this land.

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