Part 1: A History of the Committed Documentary

Chapter I

From the Early Years of Cinema to the Second World War

Introduction: before documentary

The invention of film and the subsequent emergence of the cinema as a mass popular entertainment offered to members of the public new ways of looking at the world: the films projected onscreen launched and nurtured new fantasy lives and spread new behaviors and tastes; while the darkened theater, the cinema’s exhibition site, emerged as a new site for public assembly and interaction. Early filmmaking and exhibition offered new ways of favorably depicting features of the prevailing political or cultural realities, in the process maintaining and supporting existing hegemonies. But it also offered new ways of thinking about the world, ways that carried with them the potential to disrupt the smooth continuation of prevailing hegemonies and to thereby re-order political or social life.

In cinema’s first decade, film production was dominated by the making and exhibition of short nonfiction films. Labeled ‘interest films’ or ‘actualities’, these early films offered viewers a glimpse of the real world around them whether familiar and everyday, foreign or exotic. Common themes for the early actualities were the depiction of public appearances by members of the royalty, visual accounts of the heroic achievements of the captains of industry or commerce, the launching of
warships, sporting events, and popular attractions drawn from bourgeois society. In some instances, these early films featured depictions of the lives of exotic ‘others’—grateful colonial subjects and primitive natives or the inhabitants of strange foreign lands. The scenes depicted by these early nonfiction films commonly replicated the hegemonic values and worldview of the monarchical, class-stratified, and Eurocentric cultures from which they, for the most part, emerged. But the film camera, with its ability to record and facilitate the scrutinizing of occurrences that might otherwise be unseen by viewers, also possessed the ability to challenge the status quo.

In an early illustration of film’s ability to threaten a prevailing political hierarchy, Francis Doublier, a seventeen-year old assistant of the French cinématographe inventors Auguste and Louis Lumière, found himself at the center of what may be the first example of politically inspired film censorship. In 1896, Doublier traveled to Russia to film the coronation of the Tsar Nicholas II. Working with the patronage of the French embassy in Moscow he successfully filmed the Tsar’s coronation in the Kremlin on May 14. However, three days later, Doublier’s filmmaking was terminated when he captured on film the disastrous circumstances surrounding a mass public assembly outside Moscow where the Tsar was presented to the Russian people for the first time. Half a million people had arrived from all over Russia to greet their new leader, but when the crowd surged in anticipation of the Tsar’s arrival, thousands of people were crushed and killed. To prevent news of the event from reaching the public, the Tsar’s police arrested all the news correspondents
present. Doublier was taken into custody, and his precious film camera and the exposed film of the event were confiscated and never returned (Leyda 1960:19).

In another early illustration of the potential impact film could have on political life, footage filmed by another Lumière cinematographer played a role in averting an international incident. At a military parade in St. Petersburg to honor the German-Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck, Bismarck accused the President of France of not properly saluting a passing parade. However, cinematographer Boleslaw Matuszewski presented his footage of the salute as evidence that the French statesman had behaved correctly, thereby averting a diplomatic crisis (Macdonald & Cousins 1996:13). Drawing on his experience on this occasion, Matuszewski called for the creation of an archive for the collection of films that serve as important visual evidence. In *Une Nouvelle Source de l'Histoire*, a written treatise on the subject published the same year, Matuszewski argued: “perhaps the cinematograph does not give the whole story, but at least what it gives is unquestionable and of an absolute truth.” Matuszewski added, motion picture film images are a superior form of visual evidence when compared to still photographs since: “ordinary photography allows retouching which can go as far as transformation, but try retouching in an identical way each on the thousands of almost microscopic plates!” The confiscation of Doublier’s footage and the use of Matuszewski’s footage as visual evidence illustrate that almost from its inception the cinema was understood to possess both an ability to accurately record features of the world around us and, through the exhibition of these
representations of the world, to influence how political or cultural life ultimately unfolds.

By the turn of the century, cinema, with film production still dominated by the making and circulation of nonfiction films, had emerged as a mass entertainment form and the public’s demand for new and sensational images was on the rise. Film cameras, which had initially been owned proprietarily by their inventors and were not for sale to the general public, were now available on the open market and were purchased by entrepreneurial filmmakers who sought to film increasingly dramatic events. Fredric Villers, a correspondent for the London Illustrated News and British daily newspapers reportedly became the first person to film warfare when he filmed the Greco-Turkish War of 1896 and the battle of Omdurman in the Sudan a year later (Macdonald & Cousins 1996:14).iii Close on Villers’ heels were Albert E. Smith and J. Stuart Blackton of the New York City based American Vitagraphic Company who, following the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1897, traveled to Cuba to film the fighting.iv In 1900, the Japanese Yoshizawa Company sent two cameramen to film the Chinese Boxer Rebellion, and in 1904, with the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, both Russian and Japanese film crews traveled to Manchuria to film the war’s progress. Certain that their own side would win, both Russian and Japanese audiences flocked to the cinema, in the process displaying patriotic support for their side in the war and providing an early burst of growth for both the Russian and Japanese cinema industries (Leyda 1960:25, Nornes 2003:4).
In 1914, in what is perhaps the first nonfiction depiction of a revolution in progress, Mexican revolutionary general Pancho Villa entered into a contract with the Mutual Film Corporation of New York, giving Mutual the right to film his populist insurrection against the rule of President Porfirio Díaz. In exchange, Mutual paid Villa a percentage of the revenue generated by the exhibition of the films made and provide an immediate down payment of $25,000. As a part of the deal, Villa agreed to fight his battles as far as was possible in optimal daylight filming conditions, and his planned attack on the city of Ojinaga was delayed until Mutual’s film cameras could be brought to the scene (Macdonald & Cousins 1996:24).

With the onset of the First World War, filmmaking, which had largely been in the hands of entrepreneurial individuals and film companies up until this time, was brought fully within the military arsenal of the warring nations. German propaganda newsreels featuring footage from the front rallied popular support for the war; by 1916 the German High Command considered film to be the best propaganda means for sustaining support for the war (Mühl-Benninghaus 1996:181). In Britain, propaganda documentaries and pro-war newsreels became a regular feature of the cinema-going experience. Most famous among the British propaganda films of the First World War is The Battle of the Somme (1916, 63mins), a feature length documentary filmed during the bloody failed British offensive on the Western Front in 1916. The British government hoped the film would serve as a morale-booster for the public. Selling 20 million tickets in its first two months, The Battle of the Somme remains to this day one of the great box-office successes of British cinema history.
The use of documentary film during the First World War established for the documentary genre one of its recurring uses, as state propaganda.

Other forces within society were also quick to see the benefits of film as a tool of mass education or for the shaping of public opinion. By the early 1910s, U.S. corporations and manufacturing consortiums began sponsoring the production of educational films lauding the benefits of consumerism and the American way of life or encouraging workplace safety, while depicting troublesome labor organizers as extremists and subversives. The most ambitious corporate filmmaking program was launched by the Ford Motor Company, which operated its own in-house motion picture department. By 1916, Ford was releasing over four million feet of film a year, including “short reels of assembly line production, management improvement techniques… and scenes of happy workers frolicking at company-sponsored outings” (Ross 1990:75). With militant labor activism on the rise in the years leading up to the First World War, and facing withering attacks from muckraking journalists and social reformers, ambitious business organizations produced feature films for theatrical circulation, “aimed a improving their public images, disparaging the claims of their critics, and projecting capitalist ideology in a more favorable light” (Ross 1990:73).

To maximize the visibility of their films, industry film producers developed innovative distribution strategies to circulate their films; strategies that would be replicated in later years by the makers of committed documentaries. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) established a national film distribution network involving, for no charge to film users, the distribution of films to churches, factories,
community groups, and other sites of public assembly (Ross 1990:88). Following a number of train wrecks in 1914, the New York Central Railroad Line made Steve Hill’s Awakening (1914, n.r.t.), in which careless workers are depicted as the cause of these accidents. Seeking to have this and other railroad industry films seen by audiences in communities that did not have a permanent movie theater, the railroad company took the step of outfitting a special train car as a mobile theater for use on its lines (Ross 1990:75).

The two most shocking and sensational labor tragedies of the 1910s became the subject matter for business organization sponsored films. In 1912, The National Association of Manufacturers, a trade organization linked to the New York City garment industry, sponsored the making of the docudrama The Crime of Carelessness (Howard M. Shaw, 14mins), which was made with production assistance from the Thomas A. Edison film company. In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Waist Company factory in Lower Manhattan caused the death of 146 workers, most of them young immigrant women, including many who jumped to their deaths from the upper floors of the building as hundreds of horrified spectators watched from the street. An inquiry into the fire discovered safety violations at the plant, including at least one locked door through which workers could have escaped, and an unsafe fire escape (which collapsed sending two dozen fleeing workers plummeting to their deaths).

The film The Crime of Carelessness tells the story of a fire at an unnamed textile factory: it opens with a short sequence in which a safety inspector discovers one of the factory’s exits blocked by a stack of materials, but the inspector heeds
appeals from the factory owner and doesn’t report this safety hazard to his superiors. With this brief sequence out of the way, the film then devotes most of its screen time to the story of two workers at the factory, Tom, a chain-smoking machinist, and his fiancé Hilda. In one scene, Tom is admonished by the factory’s owner for smoking in the workplace and for ignoring a sign posted on the wall reading “Positively No Smoking.” In a subsequent sequence, one alluding to the actual events at the Triangle Waist Company factory (where investigators found that the fire was probably started by a cloth cutter tossing a cigarette or match into a bin of cotton scraps), Tom lights a cigarette and carelessly tosses the match into a pile of combustible materials. When fire breaks out, Tom conducts himself heroically and rushes into the burning factory to save Hilda, but because of the injuries she incurs in the fire she will be unable to work at the “looms” again. Although *The Crime of Carelessness* tentatively indicates that the factory at the center of the story was unsafe and ends with a lukewarm admission from the factory owner that he was partially at fault for the fire (he writes to Tom offering him a job: an inter-title reads, “We are both to blame; I for not making the factory safe, you, for smoking… I am sure we have both learned our lesson”), the real culprit at the center of the story is Tom and his careless actions.

Circulated only one-year after the Triangle Waist Company fire, *The Crime of Carelessness* was designed to improve the image of the garment industry and to counter the widespread criticisms leveled at the industry for its typically appalling working conditions, poor pay, brutal treatment of workers, and lax safety standards. In the film, it is Tom’s crime that brings hardship to an otherwise contented factory
workforce. The film conveniently ignores the harsh realities of life in the garment industry, or that one of the demands made by striking workers during a massive garment workers’ walkout in New York City only months before the Triangle fire was for safer working conditions in multi-story factories like the Triangle Waist Company (Von Drehle 2003).

Following the second great labor tragedy of the period, the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 (in which the National Guard and company henchmen machine gunned and burnt the camp of striking miners in Ludlow, Colorado, killing 16 men, women and children), the United States Bureau of Mines and the Anthracite Coal Operators produced *The Miner’s Lesson* (1914, n.r.t.). Mirroring the strategy adopted by the makers of *The Crime of Carelessness*, *The Miner’s Lesson* “attributed the mine deaths and accidents that played an important role in Ludlow and other coal strikes to worker stupidity and not state or mine-owner cupidity” (Ross 1990:68). With film playing such a visible and versatile role in the depiction of social and political matters, one might think that advocates for social change might quickly turn to filmmaking as means by which to advance their political agendas. However, there is evidence that film production was adopted only hesitantly in the United States by the leftwing or progressives, and was actively opposed by some within both these camps.

Some socialists saw the cinema as a harmful distraction, one that was poisoning the minds of the cinema-going masses and thereby preventing workers from engaging in class struggle. Some within this camp proposed that workers should stay away from the cinema altogether. Bert Hogenkamp argues, writing on the use of
film by the workers movement during the early twentieth century, during the 1900s and early 1910s the workers’ movement was slow to accept film and preferred instead to focus on the workers’ movement’s traditional means of communication, the written and spoken word (1977). Nonetheless, film scholar Steven J. Ross argues, by the late 1910s, and continuing until the introduction of sound in the late 1920s, there was a significant body of filmmaking on the part of U.S. socialist and leftwing labor organizations. Among these activities were, the purchase of a Hollywood film studio by the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (who hired muckraker Upton Sinclair to make films about the struggles of railroad workers) and the formation of the Labor Film Service (LFS) and Federation Film Corporation (FFC), which both produced feature length labor themed melodramas.

In socialist films of this period, in contrast to Hollywood productions of the time, “the heroes and heroines… were unionists and Socialists, while the villains were manufacturers and state authorities” (1990:90). The widespread circulation of these films was hampered by hostile state and local censorship boards and by the system of block booking films in theaters; a practice that made, in the 1920s, the theatrical distribution of independently made films difficult for independent producers. However, Ross argues, although these films never reached mass audiences they were received favorably by the audiences who did see them. Attempts to produce labor themed or socialist films continued until the arrival of sound in the late 1920s, when the high cost of making ‘talking’ sound films made these efforts impossible.
Similarly, some progressives pushing for the introduction of moderate social reforms in the 1900s and 1910s also appear to have been reluctant to employ films in their campaign efforts. Lary May argues, in his study of motion pictures and the birth of mass entertainment, that some reform minded individuals viewed the cinema as a “vice” linked to industrialization, moral decay, and the decline of the pre-industrial social order (1983:46). However, Kevin Brownlow, in his research on films depicting “social” themes during the silent era, proposes that many social issue theme films were made during this period, but that these films have “mostly been destroyed, leaving us with an unbalanced portrait of an era” (1990:xv). Brownlow argues: between 1900 and the early 1920s reform-minded films depicting such themes as government corruption, poverty, child labor, forced prostitution and ‘white slavery’, birth control, and women’s suffrage, were widely circulated (1990).

During the 1910s, advancements in film editing and the industrialization of the cinema industry increasingly shifted the focus of film production away from nonfiction filmmaking towards the making of fiction films. In light of this shift, many of the early examples of films made to service the needs of leftwing or progressive political campaigns emerged within the realm of fiction filmmaking, and not in the making of nonfiction or documentary films. In 1912, the National American Women Suffrage Association partnered with the Reliance filmmaking company to produce *Votes for Women* (1912: n.r.t.), a melodramatic fiction film depicting the political awakening of a naïve rich girl exposed to the living conditions of working class women. The following year, the Woman’s Political Union partnered with the Unique
film company to make the dramatic feature *What Eighty Million Women Want* (1913 n.r.t.), a four-reel melodrama exposing the unequal treatment of women under American law and advocating for women’s voting rights. Although fictional in nature, both these films contained documentary images: *Votes for Women* concludes with footage of an actual suffrage march down Fifth Avenue in New York City (Ward Mahar 2006:67), while *What Eighty Million Women Want* features footage of suffragette leaders Emmeline Pankhurst and Harriot Stanton Blatch (Waldman 1985:203).

Early ‘race’ films made for circulation in America’s black communities from the 1910s onwards offer an early illustration of nonfiction film intervening in political life, and are worthy of consideration as early illustrations of politically committed filmmaking. Pearl Bowser, in her study of black newsreels of this period notes that these film sparked racial pride among their black audiences: “They showed the first black postal worker… officials of an all-black incorporated town, or blacks serving in the armed forces… for a audience of African-Americans hungry for their own image” (1999:5). In addition to documenting the achievements of the black community, some of these films directly depicted political themes, such as the political campaigning of Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington.

**The beginnings of committed documentary filmmaking: the Soviet Union**

In the late 1910s and 1920s, three developments in the field of filmmaking shaped the emergence of what we today understand as documentary film, and by extension the
emergence of what we understand as the committed documentary. The first of these
occurred in Russia as filmmakers launched the first theoretical examination of the
politically committed nonfiction film and its workings, and made nonfiction films to
service the political education and propaganda needs of the Bolsheviks during the
1917 revolution and its aftermath. The second development occurred in North
America in the early 1920s when the film pioneer Robert Flaherty transposed the
editing techniques and dramatic narrative styles developed over the proceeding
decade for use in fiction film, onto nonfiction filmmaking. Resulting from this
transposition came the launch of a dramatic style of feature length documentary
filmmaking, one where non-actors, real locations, and elements akin to an
ethnographic study are showcased within a contiguous and highly dramatic narrative.
Using narrative and editing devices borrowed from the world of fiction filmmaking,
Flaherty’s key early films (Nanook of the North [1922, 79mins], Moana: A Story of
the South Seas [1926, 85mins], and Man of Aran [1934, 76mins]) successfully
competed on the theatrical film circuit with narrative fiction films, where they
achieved comparable levels of popularity and commercial success. The third
development occurred in Britain when John Grierson combined social science based
principles of social research and theories of positivist social improvement, with
nonfiction filmmaking. Grierson is credited with coining the term ‘documentary film’
to indicate a nonfiction film which, as a “creative treatment of actuality,” exhibits the
correct balance of factual elements and film artistry. vii An astute polemicist and
advocate for nonfiction cinema, Grierson both extensively theorized the documentary
as a film form and was successful in gaining institutional recognition for his belief that the documentary could be used for the study of society or educational purposes, or to press for social reform.

For the documentary film project in general as it operates today, the second and third of these three developments have had left the most obvious mark, and the documentary principals and methods first outlined by Grierson, and the dramatic narrative structures first employed by Flaherty, are a common presence throughout the field of contemporary documentary production. However, for the committed documentary, particularly as it operated in the 1930s and later in the 1960s and 1970s, the key development was not the work of Flaherty or Grierson, but the work of the Soviets.viii

For the Bolsheviks, the challenge of mobilizing the geographically dispersed and culturally heterogeneous Russian people behind the social and political changes they sought to introduce was a massive task, and one for which they believed the cinema was ideally suited.ix During Russia’s war against Germany prior to the revolution, newsreel and propaganda films had been circulated to support the war effort. After the revolution, propaganda films were made to mobilize the populace towards revolutionary social change and to sustain the Bolsheviks’ military campaign against the counter-revolutionary forces of the White Russian Mensheviks and their foreign allies. Soon after the Bolsheviks took control of Moscow, they founded the Cinema Committee to organize the making and circulation of films supporting the revolution. This immediately led to the making of short agitation films intended for
screening for the Red Army: designated ‘agitka’ (indicating literally a ‘little agitation piece’) these short films were rapidly made and distributed to audiences in much the same way that a printed leaflet might be quickly circulated to readers.\textsuperscript{x} Among the filmmakers recruited to make these short films was Denis Arkadievich Kaufman who, under his adopted name of Dziga Vertov, became a key early innovator and theorist of political documentary making.\textsuperscript{xi}

Vertov was opposed to the making of theatrically staged fiction films and vigorously advocated for the use of film as a means by which to record actuality. He believed that through the making of non-narrative nonfiction films, the obfuscations of bourgeois narrative film could be countered, thereby freeing the cinema from what he saw as the indulgent distractions of theatrical performance.\textsuperscript{xii} An adept polemicist, Vertov, working with his wife and brother Mikhail Kaufman, adopted the title ‘troika’ (‘Council of Three’) and published manifestos extolling the benefits of the cinema with regard to the development of a new revolutionary consciousness and society. In these elegant and polemical manifestos the troika were among the first to clearly theorize the differences between documentary and fiction film.

In a manifesto from 1923, the troika proposed that the camera and the indexical images it generates is “more perfect than the human eye, for the exploration of the visual chaos of visual phenomena that fills space.”\textsuperscript{xiii} Vertov’s philosophy of film influenced the style of a string of full-length documentaries he directed during the mid 1920s, including *Cinema Eye* (*Kino-Glaz*, 1924), *Shagai Soviet!* (*Forward Soviet!* 1926, 65mins), *One Sixth of the World* (*Shestaya Chast Mira*, 1926, 61mins),
The Eleventh Hour (Odinnadtsait, 1928, 51mins), and Vertov’s most celebrated film, The Man With the Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom, 1929, 68mins)—an experimental tour de force exploring visual perception and the rhythms of modern city life, while self-reflexively revealing the filmmaking processes behind its own creation.\textsuperscript{xiv} However, perhaps Vertov’s single clearest contribution to the development of documentary film was his commitment to the recording on film of images drawn from real life without the interference of film scripts, planning or theatricality. In this regard, his desire to capture on film un-staged moments of real life anticipated by over thirty years the observational style documentary filmmaking techniques which rose to prominence during the late 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{sv}

Also key to the development of the political documentary during this period is Soviet filmmaker Esfir Shub: Shub began her film career as an editor preparing imported foreign films for exhibition in Russia. While engaged in this work, she discovered that by re-editing these imported films she could bring out new themes and create new storylines. Shub’s experiments on the editing table, illustrate the fascination many Soviet filmmakers of this period had with film montage and Serge Eisenstein is said to have watched Shub at work and been influenced by her techniques (Petric 1984:26). In addition to her contributions to the field of editing, Shub pioneered an entirely new documentary sub-genre, the ‘compilation film’ (Petric 1981:22).

To assemble the images needed for her compilation films, Shub appropriated old newsreels and the home movies of Russia’s pre-revolution aristocracy, as well as
footage and scenes from fiction films depicting historical events. On the editing table, she combined these different film elements in dramatic new ways, so that entirely new interpretations of the events depicted emerged. Prior to the revolution, the Tsar had arranged to have every aspect of his family’s life meticulously documented on film: Shub unearthed this footage in Moscow basements, thereby accessing a vast collection of images of the royal family playing tennis, attending lavish birthday parties, boating, and engaging in a variety of ostentatious religious rituals and celebrations. This footage formed the basis for Shub’s feature length documentary *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (*Padeniye Dinasti Romanovikh*, 1927, 90mins) in which she meticulously created a timeline for the events depicted in the Tsar’s footage, and contrasted these events with other events occurring in the world at the time. In this way, the finished film presents images of the Tsar and his family’s opulent celebrations, and contrasts these images with footage of Russian soldiers fighting during the First World War, the arrest of anti-Tsarist dissidents, labor strikes, and starving peasants. In one famous sequence, Shub juxtaposed images of military officers sweating as they dance on the deck of a warship with images of laborers sweating as they work. An inter-title satirically draws attention to the fact that both these forms of ‘work’ involve sweat. Shub described her compilation filmmaking process as one of reevaluating the facts provided by the film footage: “from the vantage point of the revolutionary class. This is what made my films revolutionary and agitational—although they were composed of counter-revolutionary material.” Using her montage techniques, Shub re-inscribed the meaning of the Tsar’s film
footage to create a powerful indictment of the opulent lives of the royalty, while revealing that the royal regime could exist only through the mass oppression of the Russian people.

The success of The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty led Shub to make other compilation films, including The Great Road (Veliky Put, 1927, n.r.t.) and The Russia of Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy (Rossiya Nikolaya II I Lev Tolstoy, 1928, n.r.t.). She was a committed advocate for the use of film as a tool of revolutionary change. Film, she argues, “will propagate the war against our class enemy, films which will courageously disclose both the failures and successes of a unique endeavor in the world, the endeavor of socialism.” Like Vertov, Shub valued documentary images and was opposed to the staging of films or the use of actors or sets, since the use of such devices “distorts the fact” of historical conditions (Shub 1988b:217). Shub’s pioneering work with film montage during the 1920s influenced the work of Soviet fiction and nonfiction filmmakers alike, and while it is unclear how well her work was known or how much influence it had outside Russia during the 1920s, her techniques certainly pre-date other compilation filmmaking efforts in Europe and elsewhere during the late 1920s and 1930s (and the making of compilation films by filmmakers such as Cuba’s Santiago Alvarez and the U.S.’s Emile de Antonio in the 1960s).
Cine clubs and workers’ newsreels of the 1920s and 1930s

In tandem with its efforts to solidify communist rule inside Russia, from the early 1920s onwards the Soviet regime sought to support the radical activities of workers’ organizations and communist parties around the world. To support this efforts, they harnessed film as a means by which to present overseas viewers with a positive image of Soviet social and economic successes since the revolution, while also steering these viewers towards revolutionary activities in their own home countries. Fearing that Soviet films might have exactly this effect on native populations, Soviet made films were routinely banned from exhibition by governments throughout Western Europe, and they could commonly only be exhibited in venues where film licensing was not required.

In Germany, France, the Netherlands, Britain, the U.S. and elsewhere, film societies and cine clubs were formed to exhibit films not exhibited in theatrical cinemas. In addition to the exhibition of films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, Turin and Mikhail Kalatozov, these societies would commonly exhibit avant-garde or experimental films linked to the intellectual left, or amateur films made by local film enthusiasts. Film societies linked to workers’ organizations commonly operated under the umbrella of a particular nation’s communist party or the Workers International Relief (WIR), an international pro-Soviet organization established to provide striking workers and their families with economic or food relief and cultural entertainments. The publishing of film society-affiliated film journals was
common, and some cine club or workers’ film society members were motivated to begin making committed films of their own, most of them documentaries.

In an article titled “Formation of Film Societies” published in 1935, Ralph Bond outlines how film societies should operate, and how they can evolve from serving as a site for the exhibition of films made by others, to a site of production for the making of their own films. He writes: “First of all get all the people who might possibly help. Invite representatives of all the workers’ political organizations, trade unions, co-ops, and working-men’s clubs. If there is a local amateur film society, rope them in too, their technical experience will be useful” (1980:116).xix He continues:

after a time you won’t be satisfied with showing other people’s films only, but will want to make your own… Once you have mastered camera techniques you should be able to make some quite interesting short films. For instance, a local news-reel from the workers’ standpoint would attract a lot of interest, or you could make a picture of housing conditions, or some other problem in your town (1980:117).

Bond’s comments are based on his experiences at the Kino distribution company, founded in 1933 to distribute Soviet films to British audiences. By 1934, the group had extended its activities beyond the exhibition of Soviet films to include the making of short newsreel films of its own. This led to the formation of the British Workers Film and Photo League (BWF&PL) and the subsequent production, using small gauge 9.5mm and 16mm film cameras, of over forty one-reel newsreel films. For a £2 rental fee, Kino would provide workers’ organizations or leftwing film societies with a 16mm film projector, a print of one of the feature length Soviet films, and a short BWF&PL produced newsreel. To make their own newsreels, the BWF&PL compiled
footage sent to their London office by cameramen filming events in regions around
the country. Among the events depicted in the group’s films are May Day
celebrations in London, a visit to Britain by a group of Soviet folk dancers, and a
1936 march against starvation.

The Soviet films played a key role in the emergence of workers’ filmmaking
groups such as Kino: they provided an inspiring illustration of how film could be used
to advance a particular political agenda and, equally crucially, their exhibition
brought together people who then began to band together to make films of their own.
While government censorship prevented the exhibition of the Soviet films for mass
audiences, these government restrictions catalyzed the coming together of like-
minded individuals, and therefore contributed to the formation of a parallel non-
theatrical distribution network for the circulation of both the Soviet films and others
made independently in Britain. The work of Kino in Britain was mirrored in countries
throughout Western Europe, Japan and America as workers’ groups and leftwing
intellectuals sought to distribute Soviet made films, and not infrequently turned to the
making of films of their own.

Although the Soviet films were influential in launching workers’ film projects
around the world, additional inspiration for these projects came from the newsreel
films seen in commercial cinemas. Descended from the actualities of a decade earlier,
commercial newsreels of the 1920s and 1930s were typically ten to fifteen minutes in
length, and were screened in theaters before the feature film on exhibition. Newsreels
were released on a regular basis (often on a bi-weekly, weekly or even twice-weekly
cycle), and each was composed of a series of short reports on recent events drawn from the world of industry, politics, sports, or culture. In the days before television, newsreels were the only moving-image news reports to which the general public had access. With commercial newsreels occupying a prominent place in the popular consciousness, it was natural that some within the workers’ movement would see the newsreel as a powerful means by way to spread their political message. In addition, in the radicalized political environment of the 1920s and 1930s, the creation of workers’ newsreels seemed to offer a possibility to counter the anti-worker political stance of the commercial newsreels.

In a 1935 article titled “Towards a Workers’ Newsreel”, Tischler, a writer affiliated with the American Workers Film and Photo League, describes the shortcomings of the commercial newsreels. He writes:

We have all seen battleships and fashion news, pie-eating contests and flagpole sitters, train wrecks and close-ups of bullet-riddled gangsters. Who has seen a close-up of an undernourished child, or a homeless man frozen to death, in a Hollywood newsreel? To be sure we have been shown famine pictures in China and Civil War in Cuba. At home we are given society pet shows instead of breadlines.\textsuperscript{xx}

Nonetheless, the production of workers’ newsreels able to present for viewers the kind of images proposed by Tischler, faced significant challenges. Although nonfiction newsreel making is faster and less expensive than fiction film making, even nonfiction filmmaking is costly for financially strapped workers’ organizations and unless an adequate network for the distribution of completed films could be
established, there would be little or no revenue generated by the films themselves to support further filmmaking activities.

For the members of the workers’ movement, as they sought to make and circulate their own newsreel films, there were two potential methods by which films could be distributed: first, they hoped find a way to introduce their newsreels into the existing newsreel film circuit, and to thereby have their films shown in mainstream theaters alongside the commercial newsreels. Second, the workers’ movement could circumnavigate the commercial theater system entirely and develop a parallel distribution network for their newsreels. The advantage of the first of these approaches was that workers’ newsreels would be able reach wide audiences in regular theaters, in the process having the potential to become financially self-supporting just as the commercial newsreels were. The advantage of the second approach was that it allowed workers’ groups to control the content of their newsreels, and avoid the editorial interference that would likely accompany any shared distribution arrangement with a commercial newsreel company.

In practice, the first of these two approaches was effectively closed to workers’ organizations since, for the commercial newsreel companies, there was nothing to be gained by collaborating with workers’ organizations. One of the few instances where collaboration did occur was in the Netherlands: here, the Social-Democratische Arbeiders Partij (SDAP, Social Democrat Workers’ Party) and the Dutch newsreel company Polygoon entered into a partnership agreement in which the newsreel company would include a SDAP produced segment in their weekly
newsreel schedule if, in exchange, the film service of SDAP would purchase a Polygoon report on the same subject (Hogenkamp 1977:3). This unwieldy arrangement meant that the SDAP had to make their own newsreel report on an issue or event, and underwrite Polygoon’s production costs by purchasing one of the commercial company’s newsreels. In effect, SDAP were paying for the making of two films, while receiving no financial return for their efforts. The arrangement also offered the SDAP little by way of a guarantee that once its segment was inserted into the full Polygoon newsreel, it would still convey the political viewpoint the SDAP had intended. Although the SDAP-Polygoon partnership was short-lived, a number of the other workers’ newsreel organizations discussed later in this chapter also sought, unsuccessfully in the end, to see workers’ newsreels integrated into the commercial newsreel exhibition circuit.

Further complicating the distribution of leftwing workers’ newsreels was the presence, in many countries, states, or municipal areas, of strict censorship rules governing what could and could not be screened for the public. Indeed, in some countries or local municipalities even screenings in private locations such as union halls or workers’ meeting places, required the issuing of a film exhibition license from the film exhibition-governing agency. These conditions varied from country to country (and in some instances from city to city), and created an environment generally inhospitable to independent filmmaking. For instance, in Britain while the public exhibition of most Soviet films was prohibited in licensed film theaters, these films could be shown in unlicensed private halls using 16mm film projection
equipment (Montagu 1980:114). In other countries this loophole did not exist: in Japan, for instance, film screenings of every kind required prior licensing.

Facing censorship, some early workers’ and leftwing newsreel producing groups adopted innovative forms of what we would today term as ‘culture jamming’ in an attempt to bring radical films to audiences. Founded in 1928, the Amsterdam based Filmliga film society initially focused their efforts on organizing screenings of Soviet films, and on inviting prominent filmmakers to speak about their work. Among the founding members of Filmliga was Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, who had previously made two highly regarded experimental documentaries in the style of the city symphony sub-genre, and who would serve over six subsequent decades as an international advocate for leftwing committed filmmaking.

Schooled in European avant-garde filmmaking, Ivens recalls (in his autobiography *The Camera and I*), his earliest experiences with political didactic “idea” film editing occurred in 1929 when he was placed in charge of a weekly film screening series for Dutch workers (1969). In order to circumnavigate the censorship laws in place in the Netherlands, Ivens borrowed commercial newsreels that had already been approved for public screening by the Dutch censors, and reedited the footage so that new meanings were drawn out. Ivens remembers:

> On Friday nights we would borrow a number of commercial newsreels in relation to the national or international situation of the week, re-edit them with any other footage we happened to have available to us giving them a clear political significance, print new subtitles (the films were all silent) showing relationships between events which the newsreel companies never thought of, and which would certainly have shocked them if they had ever seen our uses of their “innocent” material. For example, we could relate the injustice of an
American lynching with the injustice of the Japanese aggression in Manchuria, making a general statement about injustice which we would then localize with a current event in our community… After our Sunday morning show was finished we would take the film apart again, restore its original form and return it to the newsreel companies who were none the wiser! (1969:98)

In 1928, the German Volksfilmverband (Popular Association for Film Art) used a similar strategy when preparing *Newsreel of the Times-Face of the Times* (*Zeitbericht-Zeitgesicht* n.r.t.) for screening at the association’s first public film event (a screening of Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg* [*Konets Sankt-Peterburga*, 1927, 80mins]). In this instance however, the re-edited film still needed to be approved by the censors before it could be exhibited and so many changes were demanded that the association decided not to exhibit the film. Instead, they pledged in the future to make newsreel films using their own footage (Hogenkamp 1984:52).

**The Workers Film and Photo League**

Founded in 1930 in New York City, the Workers Film and Photo League (WF&PL) was launched with the goal of regularly releasing for the public workers’ newsreel films depicting dire conditions faced by workers and the unemployed during the early years of the Great Depression. The Wall Street crash of 1929 brought economic collapse to the U.S. and world economies, mass unemployment, breadlines, eviction, homelessness and the threat of starvation became an everyday feature of life for millions of people. For the American left, the suffering experienced by working people during the Depression seemed to illustrate everything that was wrong with the capitalist system. For individuals with communist sympathies, it illustrated why
political changes of the kind witnessed a decade earlier in Russia should be introduced in America.

During the 1920s, the U.S. branch of the WIR had been involved in the distribution of Soviet films in the U.S. and had produced at least two documentary films of its own; one depicting a New Jersey textile strike in 1926 and another depicting a North Carolina textile strike in 1929 (Ross 1990, Campbell 1984). As the impact of the depression deepened in the early 1930s, a slow response to the crisis by President Herbert Hoover’s administration bred popular resentment, followed by mass protests, strikes and solidarity marches. Radicals complained that although workers were a large part of the nation’s film-going audience, the struggle of the working class movement was not adequately reported in the commercial newsreels shown in theaters. Workers’ protests and strikes were, radicals argued, usually presented in a negative light, while police repression against the workers’ campaigns passed unreported. In May 1930, film critic Samuel Brody wrote in the communist paper *The Daily Worker*, “films are being used against the workers like police clubs, only more subtly.”

In response to the hostile depiction of workers in the commercial newsreels, Brody and a small group of others linked to the WIR formed the WF&PL. The group’s goal was to train working-class reporters and film cameramen and directors, who could make films reflecting the true experience of workers. Early on, the WF&PL adopted the 35mm film gauge as their basic format since they hoped to eventually distribute their films in the commercial theater circuit where 35mm
projectors were the standard. In the end this did not materialize beyond a few screenings in independent theaters in New York City. Fortuitously however, with the introduction of sound film during the late 1920s, silent 35mm film projectors were becoming obsolete, and the WF&PL was able to inexpensively purchase used projectors. These were used for screenings in union halls, workers’ clubs, at socialist or communist functions, or at impromptu outdoor events for workers and their families. At these screenings, the exhibition of the WF&PL’s films usually featured an improvised musical accompaniment or a live narration, delivered screen-side to explain what was occurring in each scene.

Among the founding members of the WF&FL were, in addition to Brody, Leo Seltzer and Harry Alan Potemkin, with Potemkin serving as the group’s unofficial spokesman. Over the group’s seven years of operation, a varied cast of luminaries drawn from the American artistic and leftwing community worked with the WF&PL, including photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Paul Strand, and filmmakers Jay Leyda, Leo T. Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner. Ideologically, the political views of these varied members straddled socialist, communist, and militant progressive tendencies, and, although the WF&PL was not formerly affiliated with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPA), some within the WF&FL viewed communism as the only viable alternative to America’s failing economic system.

Unifying these varied ideological perspectives was a desire to respond to the crippling hardship of the Depression years and to collectively agitate for changes in
America’s economic and social system. In January 1931, Potemkin published a list of thirteen goals for the WF&PL:

1) Education of the workers and others in the part the movie plays as a weapon of reaction;
2) The education of the workers and others in the part the movie plays as an instrument for social purposes—the U.S.S.R.;
3) The encouragement, support and sustenance of the left critic and the left movie-maker who is documenting dramatically and persuasively the disproportions in our present society;
4) The creation of a chain of film-audiences who morally and financially guarantee such films;
5) The regular publication of a periodical devoted to our purposes;
6) The fight against the class-abuses of capitalist censorship;
7) The attack upon the invidious portrayal in the popular film of the foreign born worker, the Negro, the oriental, the worker generally;
8) The opposition to the interests of the institutions like the church as they participate in the shaping of the monopolized film;
9) The use of methods of direct action, boycott, picketing against the anti-working-call, anti-Soviet film;
10) The distribution of suppressed films of importance.
11) The defense of artists and critics abused by reactionary elements (as in the Eisenstein case);
12) The re-discovery and presentation of neglected films of significance;
13) The education of the critic and worker by closer contact.xxvii

The WF&PL experienced rapid growth during its first two years and by the end of 1931 the group claimed to have a technical staff of forty-five people, including still and moving film photographers, and branch offices in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Cleveland (Alexander 1981:9). Tischler, working with the WF&PL in New York, argued:

every single workers’ organization should be contacted. The workers’ newsreel should be made part of their monthly meetings. All that is needed for the showing is a portable projector, an electric socket and a white wall or sheet for the screen… The New York League is at present making a charge of $1.50 per
reel. On this basis an hour’s showing would cost each organization $5.25 for the film. Aside from the fact that the newsreel would be of great interest to the members, it could be used as an attraction to draw new people to the organization.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

By the peak of the league’s activities a year later, the WF&PL’s staff had doubled in size and additional offices had opened in Boston, Washington D.C. and San Francisco.\textsuperscript{xxix}

There were two connected filmmaking activities undertaken by the members of the WF&PL. First, silent film footage was quickly processed and assemble-edited into rough sequences for immediate exhibition. Roughly assembled films of this kind served as topical current news reports, but typically lacked the episodic organization of scenes seen in mainstream newsreels. For this reason these films can perhaps be more appropriately described as “footage” than actual newsreels (Campbell 1984:73). Films falling within this category include the group’s \textit{America Today} series: one episode from this series features footage of a 1933 workers’ protest in Brooklyn staged to oppose the arrival of Nazi Germany’s new emissary to New York. A second film in this series contains roughly edited footage of 1932 protests in Washington against the arrest and trial of the Scottsboro Boys, who became a national cause célèbre when they, nine African American youth, were convicted on flimsy evidence of raping two white women and sentenced to death.

The second filmmaking activity undertaken by the members of the WF&PL was the making of comprehensive short documentaries. Each of these short films offered an in-depth report on a particular event or occurrence. These short
documentaries exhibit some of the formal properties of commercial newsreels, such as explanatory inter-titles and maps or other illustrations, but the more complicated editing of these films indicates that they were probably not completed until weeks or even months after the events they depict had occurred. Into this second category of films fall such WF&PL productions as *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington DC, 1932* (a.k.a. *The Hunger March Film* or *The Hunger*, 1932, 18mins) and *Bonus March* (1932, 12mins). While these short films by the WF&PL are less formally inventive or polished than Soviet documentaries of the period, they contain moments of biting irony, barbed satirical commentary, and radical image juxtapositions, suggesting that their makers were influenced by the montage techniques of the Soviets.

In the quickly paced opening sequence of *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington DC, 1932*, the viewer sees a sign indicating “No help Wanted,” homeless men sleeping on public benches, close-up shots of the feet of men wandering the streets in worn out shoes, a ‘Hooverville’ shanty-town built along New York City’s East River, and a man sitting alone in a shack cupping his head in his hands with despair. Inter-titles contextualize these images: a first inter-title announces, “1931, 14,000,000 unemployed,” followed a few seconds later by a second stating, “1932, 16,845,000 unemployed.” With the crisis of poverty facing America’s workers established in these opening scenes, the film shifts focus and depicts the journey of three thousand workers’ organization delegates from regions around the U.S. as they march on Washington to demand immediate winter relief for
workers and the introduction of unemployment insurance. The film depicts a dramatic standoff on the outskirts of Washington, during which the police and army try to stop the marchers from entering the city. This is followed by the triumphal arrival of the march at the Capitol building as Congress is forced to receive the marchers. The film ends with inter-titles indicating the marcher’s demands: “cash relief, servicemen’s back pay, farm relief, no evictions, administration of relief funds by farmers and workers, military appropriations diverted for relief, no sales tax on essential items, and insurance for workers at the employer’s expense.”

A second film by the WF&PL, titled *Bonus March*, depicting the 1932 march on Washington by First World War veterans seeking an immediate release of their military service cash bonuses, is formally and thematically similar to *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington DC*. The film begins with a biting commentary on the poverty faced by ex-servicemen during the Depression. It opens with images of U.S. soldiers fighting in the First World War. These images are followed by footage of the warm reception soldiers received when they returned to the U.S. after the war, including a welcome for soldiers maimed by the fighting. These images are immediately followed by images of homeless people living on the streets of American cities and lining up for food from emergency soup kitchens. Here, with the image of heroic servicemen returning from war still fresh in the viewer’s mind, an inter-title announces, “Thousands of ex-servicemen are jobless… their families starving.”
Having identified both poverty and government inaction as problems in need of redress, *Bonus March* then moves to depict the ex-servicemen’s ‘bonus march’ on Washington to demand release of their military service benefit. Here, *Bonus March* adopts a different tenor to *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington DC, 1932*, since the servicemen’s march did not end in victory (it was violently suppressed by the police and military). In one dramatic sequence near the end of the film, the ex-servicemen marchers are shown attending services in honor of their fallen comrades at Arlington National Cemetery; these images are juxtaposed with dramatic footage of the U.S. Army gassing marchers and burning their shanty houses on Washington’s Mall as military tanks circle the streets during the marches’ suppression. The film concludes with images of American soldiers fighting in the First World War and an inter-title reading “They remember 1917,” juxtaposed with images of the Bonus March on Washington and the inter-title “They will never forget 1932!”

The films of the WF&PL presented a depiction of American life during the Depression that was invisible to the viewers of commercial newsreels: the WF&PL’s films proposed that far reaching social change was immediately needed, and that it must be brought about through the action of workers and the unemployed. In addition to providing a different ideological perspective to the one seen in the commercial newsreels, the works of the WF&PL also exhibit different formal properties. Although the WF&PL’s films include many shots acquired using a tripod mounted camera, as was the standard commercial newsreel camera technique, their films also
include footage captured by cameramen who were stationed inside crowds of protestors, marchers or the unemployed. Through this technique, the WF&PL’s films literally present a workers’ point of view of the occurrences depicted. WF&PL founder Samuel Brody, writing on the filming of *Hunger: The National Hunger March to Washington DC, 1932*, writes:

this evidence was totally unlike anything shown in newsreels taken by capitalist concerns. Our cameramen were class-conscious workers who understood the historical significance of this epic march… We ‘shot’ the march not as ‘disinterested’ news-gatherers but as actual participants in the march itself.xxx

By using small handheld cameras, the WF&PL camera operators were able to respond quickly to events as they unfolded, and thereby capture on film “incidents that show the fiendish brutality of the police towards the marchers.”xxxi

In this way, WF&PL captured some of its most dramatic footage: the film *Detroit Workers News Special 1932* is divided into two segments, the first section depicts a march for unemployment relief in Detroit, while the second segment depicts a march in frozen weather at Ford’s River Rouge automobile production plant. Here, in a dramatic sequence featuring blurry images acquired using a small hand-held camera, the film shows police charging and tear-gassing marchers in a snow covered railroad yard. The police’s actions led to the shooting deaths of four marchers; the dramatic and disorientating quality of the hand held film footage of the workers’ battle with police increases its visual impact, and sets the emotional tenor for the charged depiction of the funeral corteges of the four dead workers seen in the film’s final scenes.
Despite rapid growth and some successful filmmaking, the WF&PL faced unremitting challenges. First among these challenges was the group’s meager financial resources: the WIR provided film stock and covered the cost of film processing, but WF&PL members were generally not paid for their work and had to provide their own travel and expense money (Alexander 1981:30). Finding commercial distribution for the WF&PL’s films was one obvious way to offset the cost of film production and to keep the operation running, but Hollywood’s commercial film companies operated a stranglehold on theatrical film distribution, and the WF&PL were able to show their films theatrically on only a few occasions. The WF&PL operated as a viable organization until 1935; the last film released under the WF&PL’s banner, titled *Getting Your Money’s Worth* (n.r.t.), appeared in 1937.xxxii

**Prokino: The Proletarian Film League of Japan**

In Japan, workers faced conditions similar to their U.S.-based counterparts during the Depression years, and leftwing organizing, strikes and protests were commonplace. Founded in 1929, the workers’ filmmaking group Prokino emerged as an offshoot of a radical theater group called the Trunk Theater, which traveled around Japan offering impromptu theater performances for workers (carrying their props and costumes in a single trunk, hence the group’s name). Among the members of the Trunk Theater was Sasa Genju, a film enthusiast, film critic, and the owner of an amateur gauge 9.5mm film camera. During 1927 and 1928, Genju made short films
with his camera, and projected them as part of the Trunk Theater’s stage performances. Although none of these early films are thought to exist today, in an account of his experiences making one of them, a film titled *ACTUALITY OF THE NODA SHOYU STRIKE* (*Noda Shoyu soggy jocko*, 1928 n.r.t.), Genju describes how he arrived on the scene of a strike by workers from the Kikkoman food company in the city of Noda. Using his amateur camera, Genju filmed for two days before returning to Tokyo to process his footage (Norms 2003:21). Later, he returned with the finished film to show it to the workers he had filmed: the workers responded with jubilation, Genju claimed, when they recognized themselves on screen and saw their struggle depicted in a favorable light for the first time (Nornes 2003:21).

This experience led Genju to write a five-page manifesto explaining how small gauge film cameras could be used in support of political struggle. Prior to the Second World War, the 9.5mm film gauge was a common format among amateur and home movie film enthusiasts, but for the serious political filmmaking enterprise in which Genju proposed to engage, the decision to use small gauge film equipment was an innovation. In his manifesto, titled “GANJU/BUKI—SATSUKEKI” (Camera—toy/weapon), in reference to the popular Japanese tendency of describing amateur film cameras as ‘toys’ or koala eiga (baby cinemas), Genju took aim at leftwing critics who devoted their energy to criticizing bourgeois film. He proposed, instead of generating what he saw as more irrelevant film criticism, these critics should equip themselves with amateur film cameras and go out into the world and make films. The
tool to enable this, he argued, was the baby camera, since it made filmmaking accessible to all people irrespective of the political conditions in which they lived.xxxiii

Prokino was founded in 1929, and the group’s decision to use the 9.5mm film gauge meant that they, unlike other workers’ film groups of the period, could not entertain the idea of distributing their films in commercial theaters, since theaters did not possess equipment for projecting small gauge films. Instead, to find audiences for their films, Prokino brought film projectors to small halls and peasant’s huts; locations where small gauge film projectors could easily be set up, and where the illumination provided by these projectors was adequate for the viewing of a film. With these projectors, film screenings could be organized almost anywhere. In some isolated communities, Prokino’s films may have offered the local populace their first experience of cinema (Nornes 2003:42).

To further simplify the production process, Prokino also commonly used reversal film rather than negative film in their cameras. Negative film has the advantage that many copies of a film can be made from it, but has the disadvantage that the camera-generated film negative must be copied in a film laboratory to make a positive before it can be projected. By using reversal film, Prokino kept their costs down, simplified the film processing process, and the camera footage was ready for projection immediately after processing. The drawback of this method was that there was only one copy of each film, and when this copy was torn, scratched, or when its sprockets wore out, it could no longer be projected.
In five years of operation, Prokino produced forty-eight films, mostly newsreels and documentaries. Police surveillance records indicate that at the height of the group’s activities in 1931: “Prokino ran two to seven [screening] events per month in every part of the country, attracting from twenty-one spectators to twenty-four hundred spectators per show” (Nornes 2003:37). Among Prokino’s early films were two documentaries depicting the funerals of two assassinated labor leaders. xxiv

A subsequent film, titled *Earth (Tochi, 1931, n.r.t.)* depicts resistance by peasants and workers to the expropriation of land for the construction of a new factory. A fourth film by the group, titled, *12th May Day in Tokyo* (1931, n.r.t.), documents May Day celebrations in Tokyo and features images of WIR members distributing food, the police harassing workers, and workers with banners and armbands as they assemble prior to the celebrations (Hogankamp 1984:61). Money for the group’s production expenses were raised through an organization called the Friends of Prokino: in exchange for a membership fee, contributors received a subscription to a Prokino-affiliated film journal as well as free admission to Prokino sponsored events. Among the subscribers to Friends of Prokino were prominent leftwing figures from Japan’s artistic and political community. The filmmakers who worked with Prokino were not paid for their efforts.

As was the case for its counterparts in Europe, government censorship posed a significant problem for Prokino. The group was required to license each of its films with the state censorship board prior to a screening, and the board was empowered make cuts to films if it saw fit. When the censors finally passed Prokino’s film *Earth*
after a six-month long holding-delay, the second reel was almost completely omitted, and the remaining scenes had been so altered that they were nonsensical (Nornes 2003:39). In another instance of the government asserting its control: prior to a May 1930 “First Proletarian Film Night” in Tokyo, the censors passed all five Prokino films to be screened without alteration. However, aware that the meaning of a film could be altered through the addition of a live screen-side narration, the censors stipulated that Prokino could not add a narration during the film’s exhibition. In response to this ruling, the event’s organizers arranged for audio recordings of leftwing songs including “The International” to be played instead (Nornes 2003:36). Despite continuous repression from the police and government, Prokino remained in operation until 1934, at which time it was forced to dissolve as the rightwing government brought all Japanese media making under its control. Prokino was outlawed, and all of Japan’s commercial newsreel companies were consolidated under the control of a single state run company (Barnouw 1996:184).

It is hard to assess the impact of workers’ newsreels on the wider workers’ movement of the period. A major problem for these filmmaking groups was finding ways to distribute their films; for example, during October and November 1931, the WF&PL organized seventy-five screenings of their films throughout the U.S. (most screenings were in the New York City area). While this is an impressive achievement by a small independent organization, it pales when compared to the distribution of commercial newsreels. During the 1930s, the mainstream *March of Time* series was viewed by over 20-million people a month in roughly 9,000 theaters. In Britain, the
BWF&PL produced seven films between 1935 and 1936 and hosted 162 public screenings. However, during a three-year period straddling 1936 and 1938, the British group had a membership of less than one hundred, was affiliated with only about thirty organizations, and possessed only one copy of some of its films.

In addition, present day critics of the workers’ newsreels convincingly argue that these films suffered from a number of basic formal weaknesses: William Alexander argues that the WF&PL suffered from a tendency to rely “for their effectiveness on the *fact* of the event, on the basic power of sheer documentation,” and not on a more complex understanding of how people could be motivated to take action towards social change (1981:33). Writing on the BWF&PL, Trevor Ryan takes a similar position. He argues, within the BWF&PL “film was seen largely in terms of providing visual confirmation of views already generally held by the audience,” rather than as employed as effective tool for influencing the as yet unconverted (1980:59).

Today, 1930s era workers’ newsreels provide an important antecedent to what we now understand as ‘activist’ or ‘organizing’ small documentary making. Indeed, as Alexander and Ryan’s comments illustrate, these early works suffered from weaknesses still common to contemporary activist and organizing filmmaking activities. In addition, although these workers’ films were referred to as newsreels and were designed to play the role of delivering recent news to audiences within the workers’ movement, their erratic production schedule and tendency to depict in each film a single issue (rather than the segmented format of the true newsreel) indicate
that many of these films can more appropriately be described as short political-organizing documentaries, rather than as newsreels in the proper sense of the term.

**Joris Ivens and Frontier Films: independent filmmaking and its pitfalls**

In the 1930s the documentary garnered attention worldwide as a tool with which the populaces of nations could be educated about state-sponsored initiatives or national agendas. In the decade before the Second World War, the Soviet Union continued to provide a stream of documentaries lauding the benefits of communism, and in Britain, by the end of the 1930s, filmmakers linked to the British documentary movement had generated roughly three hundred films. In America, government sponsorship for documentary filmmaking was not embraced as readily as in Britain or Russia, but a number of influential reform-proposing government films were made, including *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Pere Lorentz, 1936, 26mins) and *The River* (Pere Lorentz, 1937, 30mins), *The New Frontier* (H.B. McClure, 1934, 11mins), and *Power and the Land* (Joris Ivens, 1940, 38mins). Made with the financial backing of agencies funded under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal administration, these films illustrate the use of documentary film by the U.S. government in support of progressive state sanctioned reforms. However, although documentary film has strong historical ties to leftwing political agendas, or, as these reformist films illustrate, to moderate political viewpoints, Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi documentary films illustrate that no political ideology can claim proprietary ownership of the documentary as a film genre.
The rise of fascism in Europe and the Far East led during the mid to late 1930s to the making of fully fledged examples of what we would today understand as the independent committed documentary film; as opposed to the movement-based filmmaking which characterized the work of the WF&PL and many other earlier committed filmmaking endeavors. With Nazi appeasement the order of the day for the British government during the late 1930s, and with the U.S. government determined to preserve the posture of political neutrality, independent figures for the left made it their mission to inform the public about the threat fascism posed to the world.\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered\textasteriskcentered\textasteriskcentered} The rise of fascism prompted Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens to make his two most ambitious film projects to date, \textit{The Spanish Earth} (1937, 52mins), directed by Ivens and produced by a group of American writers and filmmakers operating under the collective title of Contemporary Film Historians, Inc and \textit{The 400 Million} (1939, 52mins), depicting China’s war to repel Japanese invasion forces in mainland China.

Ivens had shown his ability as an independent documentary filmmaker with the making of \textit{Misery in Borinage} (\textit{Misère au Borinage}, 36mins) in 1934. This silent black and white film, co-directed by filmmaker Henri Storck, depicts life in Belgium’s Borinage coalfield region two years after a failed miner’s strike. The film was partially funded by the Brussels’ cine-club Club de l’Ecran, but to make the film the Ivens and Storck worked informally with rank and file miners in the region and relied on the generosity of these workers and their families for housing, food and for the transportation of their film equipment. Ivens described the film as an
“underground film” because it was made covertly so as to avoid attacks by local authorities opposed to the making of a film sympathetic to the miners’ cause (1969:85).

_Misery in Borinage_ offers and dark and at times despairing images of unemployment and poverty during the Great Depression. Using on-screen intertitles to explain the conditions and events it depicts, the film begins with a depiction of the impact of the Depression on workers around the world. Using footage filmed in the U.S. by the WF&PL, the film’s opening sequence shows closed factories and empty dock facilities in America, as unemployed workers press against the padlocked gates of a factory. The film then introduces Borinage, where the failure of a miner’s strike two years earlier has left the workers blacklisted, disorganized, and in poverty. In its message, the film walks a fine line: on the one hand, it seeks to show the despair and disorganization of the defeated miners and the horrific poverty in which they now live. On the second hand, the film seeks to rekindle organizing efforts by the miners, and to highlight the small victories that can be won if the workers work in unison. This dual message is visible in the film’s depiction of evictions. In a first sequence, a worker, his children, and his pregnant wife, are seen expelled from their home and are then shown living exposed to the elements in the entranceway of an abandoned building. In a second subsequent sequence, depicting the attempted eviction of a worker and his family the bailiff is prevented from expelling the family by the arrival of a group of miners who sit on, or lay their hands on, every item of the eviction-
facing family’s furniture, thereby preventing its removal and winning a small victory for the unemployed workers.

Using montage techniques visibly influenced by Soviet filmmaking, the film is filled with stark visual contrasts. One sequence contrasts images of gangs of elderly women scavenging a mine’s slag heap for burnable fragments of coal with images of acres of neatly piled heaps of company owned coal, which stand idly behind a barbed wire fence. In a second juxtaposition, images of rows of uninhabited high quality company owned houses are contrasted with images of unemployed workers living in corrugated iron construction shanty housing. And in a third juxtaposition: an unemployed worker is seen cycling many miles to pick up a loaf of bread for his family from another worker. To reach his friend’s home, the worker must, on his outward and return journey, pass the cake-filled window display of a bakery he cannot afford to patronize. In these sequences, as in the other juxtapositions the film presents for the viewer, the filmmakers seek to illustrate that quality housing, good food and heating supplies are plentiful in Borinage, but the capitalist system keeps these necessities from workers. Driving this point home, the film ends with the intertitle “Workers will only be safe from exploitation by their fellow man through the dictatorship of the proletariat and the realization of socialism;” the text is followed by an image of a small newspaper clipping featuring a picture of Lenin, mounted in the wall of an unemployed miner’s home.

In a filmmaking career spanning from the late 1920s to the 1980s, Ivens directed films linked to numerous political struggles around the world (including
struggles in Canada, Chile, China, Cuba, Brazil, France, East Germany, Mali, the Soviet Union, and the United States) and played an influential role in educating legions of politically committed filmmakers. In his study of Ivens’ association with Cuban filmmaking following the Cuban revolution of 1959, Thomas Waugh describes Ivens as “the dean of all socialist filmmakers” (1985:361) and a filmmaker who “almost singlehandedly pioneered… before anyone else on the western left, an activism that lends solidarity and resources to local initiatives without imposing external models of any kind” (1985:363). Ivens working practice offers a clear illustration of what we today understand as ‘independent’ political filmmaking as opposed to directly ‘movement based’ filmmaking. Where movement based filmmaking typically operates with the direct sanctioning support of a political party or social movement organization and often forefronts collectivized filmmaking processes rather than individual authorship, independent filmmaking commonly situates the filmmaker as an individual political entrepreneur who allies themselves, to varying degrees and sometimes only temporarily, with various political constituencies. As Ivens’ filmmaking activities illustrate, although independent filmmakers typically ‘frame’ the issue they depict in much the same way as the movement or constituency with which they are temporarily allied, they also serve as independent political entrepreneurs and as such are un-harnessed from the direct sanctioning support or dogma of any one political party or social movement. Thus, although all Ivens filmmaking was informed by a lifelong commitment to
international socialism, he was equally at home making films depicting workers’
issues, anti-colonial and national liberation struggles, or anti-fascist wars.

In 1934, the desire for greater ‘independence’ on the part of some of the
members of the WF&PL led to a split within the group, with some members declaring
their intention to continue devoting their energy to the making and circulation of
nonfiction workers’ newsreels, while others expressed their frustration at what they
saw as the limitations of the documentary form and proposing instead to include
dramatic staged scenes in their future films. The breakaway group initially adopted
the name Nykino and set out to regularly release newsreels featuring ‘staged’
sequences, of the kind seen in the popular March of Time newsreel series. Only two
editions of Nykino’s newsreel were completed, Sunnyside (1936, n.r.t.) and Black
Legion (1936, 6mins), before the group incorporated under the name Frontier Films in
1937 and set about making longer films.

In its first year of operation, Frontier Films produced four documentaries:
three of these illustrate the company’s focus on making films depicting the rise of
European and Japanese fascism. But in the years leading up to the Second World
War much of Frontier Films’ energy was consumed making the company’s most
ambitious film project, a feature length film titled Native Land (Paul Strand & Leo
Hurwitz, 1942, 80mins). Featuring a series of staged vignettes depicting how big
business and its agent provocateurs undermine democracy through the suppression
free speech and the murder those who oppose them, the film makes a populist appeal
for civil liberties and the American Bill of Rights. Parting company with both
revolutionary socialist thought and the formal properties of Soviet filmmaking, *Native Land* argues for a return to American pastoralism and the upholding of democratic ideals as intended, the film proposes, by the U.S.’s founding fathers.

The resulting film is clumsy in both its message and its formal arrangement, and, seven years in the making, it was completely out of date before it was released. While the ‘movement based’ short workers’ newsreels of the WF&PL were sometimes mired in the details of particular campaigns or risked numbing audiences with the details of local outrages, they nonetheless successfully depicted distinct historical moments of the workers’ movement’s struggle. *Native Land*, made by filmmakers positioned at greater distance from the workers’ movement, illustrated that the making of longer more ‘theoretical’ films introduces other challenges, including the challenge of ensuring that greater independence on the part of the filmmaker does not lead the filmmaker to lose touch with the issues they seek to address (Buchsbaum 1990:136). Politically irrelevant by the time of its release in 1942, *Native Land* serves as a bookend to pre-war American radical filmmaking; it signals a decline in the ties between the international socialist workers’ movement and committed documentary making in the U.S. while illustrating also that when filmmakers break their ties to existing social movements organizations and seek greater independence for themselves, they also risk producing works which are of little genuine political relevance.

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1 Quoted by Macdonald & Cousins (1996:14).

Villiers’ presence with a film camera at the second of these two wars is confirmed. However, in his article “Frederic Villiers: War Correspondent,” Stephen Bottomore argues that the only evidence that the flamboyant Villiers filmed the Greco-Turkish War are Villiers’ own statements in his memoirs (1994). Bottomore proposes, in light of Villiers’ larger than life character, further verification of his claim is needed before it can be accepted as fact.

The two filmmakers failed to film the war’s most dramatic event, the Battle of Santiago Bay. Instead, on their return to New York they staged the battle for the camera, using a tank of water and paper warships. They used cigar smoke and gunpowder to create the effect of a battle.

In another case, American filmmaker and explorer Captain F.E. Kleinschmidt traveled to Europe in 1914 to film the war. With the assistance of the German Army, he filmed footage of actual fighting for American audiences. Kleinschmidt wrote that his efforts were so welcomed by the German Army that on one occasion an artillery barrage against Russian forces was arranged “to enable me to take the pictures of the exploding bombs.” When the U.S. entered the war on the side of the allies in 1917, Kleinschmidt’s films were banned as German propaganda.

The film was shot by official government cinematographers Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell: the footage used in the film was originally intended for use in newsreels, but when its high quality was recognized it was decided to put out a feature length film. For a work of propaganda, the resulting film is surprisingly graphic in nature and although some of scenes of soldiers ‘going over the top’ were staged for the camera, it offers a fairly accurate and gruesome depiction of the destruction that typified trench warfare on the Somme.

The first use of the term ‘documentary film’ is credited to Grierson in a review of Robert Flaherty’s film Moana, which was published in a New York newspaper in 1926. The balance of ‘actuality’ and ‘creativity’ within a documentary film, proposed Grierson, differentiated films of the documentary type from newsreel ‘reportage’ and from merit-less travel or educational films. He dismissed newsreels as “reflecting hardly anything worth preserving of the times they recorded” (Grierson 1966:201).

Grierson developed an understanding of the film techniques used by the Soviets when he had been recruited to prepare English language versions of Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potyomkin, 1925, 66mins) and Victor A. Turin’s Turksib (1929, 57mins) for American and British audiences. Taking pains to make it clear he was not a Bolshevik, Grierson willingly acknowledged he had been profoundly influenced by Soviet cinema. His ideas about documentary filmmaking, as with the films made by the British documentary movement he launched, were deeply influenced by Soviet filmmaking but serve primarily as an antecedent for what we today understand as the social documentary, rather than radical committed documentary making. When studying in the U.S. in the early 1920s, Grierson was inspired by Chicago school style social science research methodologies, and turned to filmmaking as a way of applying the techniques he had witnessed in Chicago to an examination of British social life. Today, while Grierson’s contribution to documentary filmmaking, as with the theoretical approaches he proposed for analyzing the documentary, continue to cast a long shadow over the documentary film project in general, his impact with regard to committed documentary making is, at best, paradoxical. Grierson was interested in using documentary film as a tool by which to foster change within British society, yet the change he sought to introduce was moderate and only reformist in character. As the leader of the government and later corporate sponsored British documentary movement, Grierson
embraced the making films of which served as propaganda for the British government or his corporate paymasters, and he was not concerned that he, and the stable of filmmakers with whom he worked, might serve as a cultural elite—proposing modest social reforms while pushing the views of their paymasters on the general populace. Grierson’s first film, *Drifters* (1929, 49mins), illustrates the director/producer’s paradoxical status as a ‘committed’ filmmaker. In style, *Drifters* draws on the aesthetics and montage techniques of Soviet filmmaking, to present for viewers an inspiring portrait of Britain’s herring industry in the North Sea. However, the production of *Drifters* was commissioned by the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), an arm of the British government established to generate increased cultural cohesion and trade between the various regions of the British Empire through the circulation of pamphlets, posters, and other publicity materials. As might be expected from a film sponsored by an organization with such a mandate, *Drifters* was not a radical film, although it did present a dignified depiction of workers linked to the fishing industry. Grierson’s paradoxical political standing is further evident in his championing of ‘problem films’. These are films depicting a social problem, such as inadequate housing (*Housing Problems*, Edgar Anstey & Arthur Elton, 1935: 16mins), poor nutrition (*Enough to Eat?*, Edgar Anstey, 1936, n.r.t.), pollution (*The Smoke Menace*, John Taylor, 1937, n.r.t.), or poor educational services (*Children at School*, Basil Wright, 1937, n.r.t.). Most celebrated among the British movement’s problem films is *Housing Problems*, a depiction of life for the working class residents of London’s rat-infested East End. The appalling housing conditions depicted in the film make a powerful argument for slum clearance, and for the building of adequate working class housing. However, the production of *Housing Problems* was sponsored The Gas Light and Coke Company, which Grierson had persuaded pay for the film on the grounds that the construction of modern government-financed housing would lead to an increase in the demand for gas. In a similar fashion, the problem film *The Smoke Menace* shows the problems caused by the burning of raw coal, and proposes that these problems can be overcome through the introduction of new cleaner fuels. The film was made with sponsorship from The British Commercial Gas Association, which hoped to become the provider of these cleaner fuels. The ‘problem film’ formula is a key presence within contemporary documentary production: underlying the making of films of this type is the presupposition that through a realist depiction of a feature of the world, action on the part of viewers can be fostered, and an amelioration of the problem depicted will follow. Where Grierson differed from the Soviets, and where committed documentary films commonly differ from social documentaries, is the means by which these problems can be ameliorated. For Grierson the answer lay in moderate social reforms under the umbrella of Britain’s liberal democratic state and not, as was the case for the Soviets, in the development of radical new ways of looking at the world or the ascendancy of socialism. A final useful counterpoint to help us understand the position of the British movement’s documentaries within the political conditions of their time is offered, first, by noting that films presenting more radical perspectives (including the Soviet films of the period) commonly fell foul of Britain’s film censors. And second: by looking at place of the British documentary movement’s films within the political life of the British Empire. While the stated goal of the EMB, for example, was to encourage trade and mutual understanding within the Empire, under closer examination it is clear that its more tangible mission was one of sustaining British colonial rule and the exploitation of imperial markets and resources. As Priya Jaikumar argues, the British documentary movement’s film depictions of life in the Empire (notably *Cargo From Jamaica* [Basil Wright, 1933, n.r.t.] and *Song of Ceylon* [Basil Wright, 1934, 38mins]) served as “imperial realism” (2006). She
argues: “Classical definitions of realism point to art’s promise to disturb the bounds of ideology, to humanize, and to bring the audience into astonishing proximities with the world and its social relations” (2006:109). Conversely, she argues, imperial realism is the “very antithesis of realism in that it de-historicizes colonial relations, making the ideology of one race, nation, and class stand in for a totality” (2006:109). In contrast to the favorable reception received by the state sanctioned filmmaking efforts of Grierson and his compatriot filmmakers, documentaries critical of the British Empire or those which sought to challenge colonialism faced censure. In India the independence movement led by Mohandas Gandhi fostered, in the late 1920s and 1930s, an intensive early phase of Indian documentary filmmaking, including the making of such titles as: Mahatma Gandhi’s March for Freedom (n.d. Sharda Film Co. n.r.t.), Mahatma Gandhi’s March, (n.d. Krishna Film Co. n.r.t.), and Mahatma Gandhi Returns from the Pilgrimage of Peace (n.d. Saraswati, n.r.t.). However, the intervention of colonial censors either prohibited public exhibition of these films, or refused their licensing for exhibition until scenes perceived to be politically inflammatory were removed (Lal 2005).

ix One of the first decrees of the revolutionary regime following the October 1917 revolution was for the setting up a film sub-section, the kinopodotdel, within the newly formed Department of Education (which was at the time under the supervision of Lenin’s wife Nadezhda Krupskaya). In 1919, all Russia’s film industries were nationalized and placed under state control: the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) was created to train filmmakers.

x To bring these films to audiences around the nation, the Soviets created, in 1918, their first ‘agit-train’. When this was dispatched to the Eastern Front, on board were a printing plant equipped for the publication of newspapers and leaflets, a theater company prepared to write as well as to perform plays, and a film crew (Leyda 1960:132). Later agit-trains carried a full laboratory for the processing and editing of films.

xi Vertov’s proposal that only nonfiction film could be used for revolutionary goals was not widely accepted by Soviet filmmakers: advocates for fiction film argued that fiction could present the nation’s challenges in a way that would entertain the masses. In addition, they argued, with fiction films topics and issues that were difficult to comprehend could be made accessible for mass audiences. Advocates for nonfiction film argued that fiction films had served as a bourgeois opiate for the masses, distracting them from the insight offered by access to reality, and had thereby curtailed the redress of real conditions. To resolve the clashes between advocates for fiction filmmaking and those who advocated for nonfiction filmmaking, Lenin instituted the ‘Leninist Film Proportion’, which indicated that a percentage of the films made each year must be nonfiction (MacDonald & Cousins 1996:49).

xii In 1922, Vertov was appointed to oversee the production of Kino-Pravda (meaning literally ‘film truth’), which became a twenty-three issue series of newsreel propaganda films made between 1922 and 1925. Pravda was the name of the Soviet daily newspaper, a central organ of the communist party. Individual episodes within the Kino-Pravda film series were composed of short film segments: in one six-segment Kino-Pravda episode, the first segment is a film report on the renovation of the Moscow trolley system and features images of rails being laid, electric lines put in place, voltage measured and trolleys running. The second segment depicts the building of Khodinka Airport, where, in an illustration of the peaceful nature of the new revolutionary state, military tanks are seen pulling soil-leveling machines. The third segment features a lengthy report on a trial of counter revolutionaries who opposed the Bolshevik state. The fourth segment depicts peasant communes being organized, and the
redistribution of land formerly held by rich landowners. And the fifth and sixth segments present two reports in the lives of children within the new Soviet state: those living in a sanitarium for crippled children town of Gelenzhik; and at the Melekes rail junction, where homeless children beg for food (Ellis & McLane 2005:30). The scenes depicted in these varied segments offer inspiring illustrations of recent Soviet advancements and modernizations, and illustrate in a matter-of-fact way the economic and social challenges facing the new Soviet state and its inhabitants.
xiii Quoted by MacDonald & Cousins (1996:53).
xiv The Man With the Movie Camera is a far cry from the polemical radical agitka Vertov was making a decade earlier. Instead, it exhibits features in common with the city symphony documentary film sub-genre, which includes such films as Berlin: Symphony of the City (Walther Ruttmann, 1927, 65 mins), Only the Hours (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926, 45 mins), Manhatta (Paul Strand & Charles Sheeler, 1921, 11mins), and Subject of Nice (À Propos de Nice, Jean Vigo, 1930, 25 mins).
xv By the 1930s, the Soviet film industry was dominated by advocates for Soviet style social realism and the formal experimentation that had characterized Vertov’s The Man With the Movie Camera faced hostility from the industry’s bureaucratic decision-makers. Out of favor with his state paymasters, Vertov continued to make films into the 1930s, but his mode of filmmaking became more and more unworkable in an environment where everything needed to be scripted and approved prior to production. In the late 1930s, Vertov slid into anonymity as a newsreel film editor.
xviii Founded by the Communist International in 1921.
xx Quoted by Hogenkamp (1977:31). From “Towards a Workers’ Newsreel,” by Tischler. First published in Film Front, Vol. 1, No. 4, p19-20, 1935. In “Towards a Workers’ Newsreel”, Tischler elegantly argues that workers are not well served by the commercial cinema. He writes: “the Motion Picture is the most powerful and far-reaching medium of spreading information and propaganda. Unfortunately, the average worker today is not fully conscious of the insidious propaganda content of the pictures he sees in his neighborhood movie house. During the day he comes in contact with the exploiters and parasites whose bread and butter he produces. Instinctively he feels he has nothing in common with these people. But at night, he actually pays admission to share their very life in the feature picture. He is an easy prey to subtle class propaganda, because he is off guard, and out for a good time. As for the newsreel, Messrs. Hearst, Fox and Zukor will see that it fits in with the rest of the show.” Quoted by Hogenkamp (1977:31). Tischler’s full name is not known. William Alexander writes, in the most comprehensive study of the Workers Film and Photo League currently available, his name was “lost in the memories of my interviewees” (1981:43).
xxi During the process of film licensing, film censors could insist on the deletion of controversial or inflammatory scenes; or they could simply drag their feet, tying films up for weeks or months until the events depicted had lost their relevance.
xxii The origin of Filmliga lies in a May 13th 1927 screening of I.V. Pudovkin’s film Mother at an Amsterdam artist’s club. The film’s screening was initially banned by the Dutch film censor but the Mayor of Amsterdam agreed that the film could be shown, when he was
convinced that only a group of “harmless artists” would be in attendance (Hogenkamp 1977:7). After the screening, a group of Amsterdam film enthusiasts, including Ivens, organized themselves under the group name Filmliga.

Early in his career Ivens exhibited an interest in avant-garde and abstract films. For his film The Bridge (De Brug, 1928, 11mins), Ivens filmed the complex operation of a mechanical railway bridge in Rotterdam as it was raised and lowered so that ships could pass underneath. This was followed by the film Rain (Gegan, 1929, 12mins), depicting what appears to be a single rainstorm on the streets of Amsterdam, but which, in order to film the many shots needed for the film’s complex montage of images, was actually filmed over a four month period.

Ivens is likely referring to his involvement with the Vereeniging voor VolksCultuur (VVVC) (Association for Popular Culture), which was affiliated with the Communist Party of Holland. The VVVC was formed in 1928, with the aim of organizing theater, film screenings, and other events for workers in Amsterdam. When VVVC announced the screening of its first newsreel at an Amsterdam theater in 1930, the film on exhibition turned out to be a re-edited commercial newsreel accompanied by ‘satirical’ improvised organ music (Hogenkamp 1984:56). Inspired by the warm reception this appropriated footage film received, VVVC made additional newsreels using their own camera footage. Two were completed in 1930: the first featured images from the southern regions of the Soviet Union with an explanatory narration added during the screening. The film was credited as being shot “by one of the friends of the VVVC in the Soviet Union.” This may have been footage recorded by Ivens on his trip to Russia a few months earlier (Hogenkamp 1984:56).

Shortly after the WF&PL’s creation, the word ‘Workers’ was dropped from the group’s name and it went instead by the simpler the name, ‘Film & Photo League’. To avoid confusion I have referred to the group by its original longer name throughout: in 1982, when group member Leo Hurwitz restored some of the League’s surviving films, he credited them all to the Workers Film & Photo League.

Informal branches were also operating in Hollywood (California), New Haven (Connecticut), Cleveland (Ohio), Laredo (Texas), Madison (Wisconsin), and Perth Amboy, Newark and Paterson (New Jersey) (Campbell 1984:79).


In 1982, a compilation of WF&PL films was restored and assembled by Leo Hurwitz. The two-reel 16mm film compilation contains in program one: Workers Newsreel Unemployment Special 1931 (1931, 7mins), Detroit Workers News Special 1932: Ford Massacre (1932, 7mins), Hunger: the National Hunger March to Washington (1932, 18mins). Program two: The National Hunger March 1931 (1931, 11mins), America Today and The World in Review (1932, 11mins), Bonus March (1932, 12mins). A film print of this compilation of films is in the collection of the Donnell Media Center of the New York Public Library.
Another later example of 9.5mm gauge filmmaking in the service of political advocacy is offered by People’s Newsreel, operated in the southern English county of Sussex between 1938-1939. The films made by this group were funded by public fundraising collection, and their films reported on leftwing events in the county; including celebrations marking the anniversary of the Russian Revolution, and the homecoming from Spain of three local members of the International Brigade (Hogenkamp 1977:28).

Yamamoto Senji and Watanabe Seinosuke. Only one of these films, titled Yamamoto Senji’s Worker—Farmer Funeral (Yamasen ronoso, 1929), is known to survive today.

During the 1930s, the international interest in documentary film as a tool for nation building and national education led, in some instances, to what today may seem strange film screening programs. On May 10th 1936, The Plow that Broke the Plains (Pere Lorentz, 1936, 26mins) premiered in Washington D.C.’s Mayflower Hotel at an event sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. Over the course of the evening, six films surveying the state of contemporary documentary making were presented to an audience including members of the White House staff, the diplomatic corps, and the U.S. Supreme Court. The films screened were, in addition to The Plow that Broke the Plains, Paul Rotha’s The Face of Britain (1935, 19 mins), Len Lye’s experimental animation Color Box (1935, 3 mins), the Soviet-made Harvest Festival (1935, n.r.t.), the French-made Midi (Jean Dréville 1935, n.r.t.), and an extract from the Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film The Triumph of the Will (1935, 114 mins)(Snyder 1994:40).

Conservatives and the Hollywood film industry vehemently opposed the making and distribution of these and similar documentary films because they were opposed to the idea that the government should engaged in the making of propagandistic films, particularly if these films were in support of progressive New Deal social reforms. (Snyder 1994). In addition, the making of The Plow That Broke the Plains illustrates the tensions that could emerge between the mild reforms proposed by a government sponsored film, and the radical aspirations of the American leftwing. The film depicts the crisis of the American dustbowl and the plight of small farmers forced from their land by drought. To make the WPA sponsored film, Lorentz called on the cinematography skills of WF&PL affiliated filmmakers Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner. Conflict arose between these leftist filmmakers and Lorentz: Strand and Steiner protested that Lorentz saw the dustbowl primarily as a natural disaster, while they believed it should be depicted as the outcome of failed government policies and the greed of large landowners (Snyder 1993:31).

A few months after the rise of the German Nazi Party to power in 1933, Adolf Hitler personally requested that the popular screen-actor turned film director Leni Riefenstahl make a documentary film recording the 1933 Nazi party rally in Nuremberg. Riefenstahl quickly assembled a crew, filmed the event, and delivered Victory of Faith (Sieg des Glaubens, 1933, 60mins) to the Nazis. The film was received warmly by Hitler, who commissioned Riefenstahl to make a second film; a more comprehensive and thoroughly planned depiction of the Nazi party’s next annual rally in Nuremberg. To realize this project, Riefenstahl orchestrated a massive filming project employing a staff of over 120 people, including sixteen leading cameramen, cameras on automobiles, and specially designed lifts and dollies for use at the arena where the nighttime climax of the rally would take place. The film that emerged from these efforts, Triumph of the Will (Triumph des Willens, 1935, 114mins), is a masterpiece of dramatic filmmaking and garnered interest and acclaim worldwide. However, for many viewers Triumph of the Will rang a discordant note: in near perfect synchronicity the film combined stunning camerawork with the breathtaking choreography of the rally,
while clearly illustrating the demonic nature of Hitler and his compliant, regimented, and almost inhuman army of followers. Following the Nazi defeat of 1945, and facing prosecution as a war criminal, Riefenstahl tried to distance herself from the Nazis. She argued that she was not responsible for how her film had been used, and she, after all, had merely documented on film an event that would have occurred even had she not been there filming. Riefenstahl’s critics counter this is not true: in fact features of the rally were prepared specifically for Riefenstahl’s cameras and Riefenstahl had, throughout the war years, maintained an intimate relationship with the Nazi leadership (Trimborn 2002). Indeed, by exploiting her close connections to the Nazi leadership, Riefenstahl had pressured cameramen and film technicians to work for her on her projects, even if they had other commitments or were reluctant to do so. Triumph of the Will, and Riefenstahl’s subsequent filmic masterpiece Olympia (1938, 111mins), reveal a highly original, creative, and relentlessly driven documentary film auteur, one willing to apply her craft to the making of propaganda films in support of the most demagogic agendas. Today, Triumph of the Will is the single most horrifying illustration of documentary filmmaking in the service of state propaganda; the film’s masterful formal artistry underscores that the documentary film genre can be harnessed to serve any political cause. 

xxxviii With the outbreak of the Second World War documentary film was again embraced by the combatant nations as a tool of propaganda. In Britain, many of the filmmakers connected with the British documentary movement were recruited to make propaganda films in support of the allied war effort (including: London Can Take It [Humphrey Jennings, 1940, 10mins], Target For Tonight, [Harry Watt, 1941, 48mins], Desert Victory [Roy Boulting, 1943, 60mins], Fires Were Started [Humphrey Jennings, 1943, 80mins]). In Germany, Nazi bugle-call propaganda films extolling military successes were viewed as an integral feature of the war effort, and propaganda minister Josef Goebbels closely supervised film production. Among the most notorious of wartime Nazi documentary propaganda films is the anti-Semitic The Eternal Jew (Der Ewige Jude, 1940, n.r.t.), which served to provide justification for Nazi genocide of Europe’s Jewish population. In American, where state supported documentary making activities had been more sporadic, the government turned to Hollywood filmmakers for the nation’s propaganda film needs. These included, most famously, the recruitment of Hollywood director Robert Capra to direct Why We Fight, a series of propaganda films designed to educate military inductees and the general public about the reasons for the war.

xxxix The documentaries Heart of Spain (Herbert Klein & Geza Karpathi, 1937, 30mins) and Return to Life (Henri Cartier-Bresson & Herbert Klein, 1938, 50mins) express support the Loyalist cause in their Spanish Civil War fight against the Nazi supported forces of General Francisco Franco, while China Strikes Back (Harry Dunham, 1937, 37mins) presents a celebration of the military and popular mobilization of the Chinese people against Japanese aggression in China. Other filmmakers and filmmaking groups around the world were also active in opposing fascism during the years leading up to the Second World War. In Spain, the anarchist worker’s organization Confederación Nacional del Tabajo (CNT), with a membership of over one million in 1936, made both newsreels and fiction films encouraging the redistribution of wealth and property, collectivization of industrial and cultural production, and, following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, opposing the fascist coup led by General Franco (Porton 1999:79).

x In a scathing analysis of Native Land, film scholar Jonathan Buchsbaum argues, the film illustrates the “utter futility” of the actions of the individuals who broke with the WF&PL to
make longer fiction films. He states: “the film has absolutely nothing to say about the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow Trials, Hitler, World War 2, the formation of the CIO, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, or other momentous developments… Perhaps it is unfair to criticize the filmmakers for the practical difficulties of realizing their project in a more timely fashion. Nonetheless, such problems were (and are) endemic to any independent filmmaking and so might have been predicted” (1990:136).