Chapter 2

Anti-Colonial Struggles, the New Left and War in Vietnam

Introduction
The years immediately following the Second World War were a period of disarray for the European and American left as connections to Soviet Union, and to the ideological wellspring Soviet communism had provided before the war, proved untenable. As the American political landscape swung to the right, leftwing political organizing, seeking new direction, began to coalesce around a constellation of new political issues and themes, ones that would in subsequent decades characterize the political agenda of the New Left. In tandem with the new political focus of the left during this period, leftwing filmmaking began to address new themes, including themes related to racial justice and opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

In his study of “message movies” of the postwar period, Thomas Cripps proposes that themes of racism and the status of African Americans in U.S. society garnered previously unseen interest from political filmmakers and their sponsors in the immediate aftermath of the war. Cripps argues that these films provided a “voice of conscience-liberalism that persisted in the face of… conservative reaction” (1993:152). Often circulated through non-theatrical channels, films such as the anti-racism animation The Brotherhood of Man (Robert Cannon, 1946, 8mins), which was made with sponsorship from the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), were seen by large audiences through union hall,
church hall and school room screenings, or through their accession to the library holdings of progressive organizations. Despite the rightward shift in American politics, *The Quiet One* (Sidney Meyers, 1947, 65mins), which blended staged dramatic sequences and documentary footage to depict the plight of an African American boy facing poverty and racism, was so widely circulated through informal distribution channels of this kind that in the late 1940s it achieved a level of “popularity unmatched by a dramatized documentary since the *Nanook of the North* in 1922” (Cripps 1993:172).

A similar sequence of events unfolded in Europe: in her study of “oppositional cinema” in Britain, Margaret Dickinson argues that leftwing filmmaking lost ground during the late 1940s and early 1950s as the political movements which had dominated the pre-war period failed to find direction in the post-war environment (1999). However, she argues, despite a slowdown in British committed film production, leftwing filmmaking did not stop altogether and some key figures and organizations continued to make and distribute films, thereby maintaining a thread of continuity that would help the reemergence of New Left affiliated oppositional filmmaking in subsequent years (1999:17). By the late 1950s, Dickinson argues, British leftwing filmmaking began to be fully re-energized with the emergence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Anti-Apartheid movement, and other New Left political priorities (1999). She proposes: the activities of CND in particular led to an outburst of filmmaking activity, including the making of the widely distributed documentary *March to Aldermaston* (The Film and T.V Committee for
Nuclear Disarmament, 1959, 30mins) which depicts a four-day fifty-mile march by thousands of CND supporters from London’s Trafalgar Square to the Aldermaston nuclear weapons research facility in southern England.

Despite the slowing of committed film production during the immediate post-war period, technological changes were afoot which would dramatically invigorate all forms of documentary filmmaking in the following decade. Portable 16mm cameras had been on the commercial market since the 1920s, but the use of these cameras had been limited to amateur filmmakers and home movie enthusiasts. During the war, the 16mm film format was widely adopted by war correspondents and military photographic units. Using small 16mm cameras, these users were able to capture aspects of the war that could not have been filmed using cumbersome 35mm equipment. Immediately following the war, the 16mm format found acceptance among professional filmmakers, most noticeably among those who sought to bring a gritty look of ‘realism’ to their films.

Changes were also afoot in the field of sound recording: during the pre-war years the recording of film sound required expensive and cumbersome equipment, thereby largely limiting the recording of synchronized film sound to well funded studio based productions. For this reason, most documentary films made before the war relied for their audio track on the addition in the editing room during post-production of an explanatory voice-of-god narration, scored music, or Foley-artist generated sound effects. For many committed filmmakers of the 1920s and 1930s the
cost of adding sound, even during post-production, was so costly and time consuming that it was often beyond their means.

During the 1950s this situation changed, as documentary filmmakers in France and Canada successfully developed synchronized-sound recording equipment compatible with quartz motor-controlled 16mm film cameras; thereby bringing together the mobility of the 16mm film cameras with an ability to record sound in the field. The mobility of this new equipment and its ability to capture spoken dialogue facilitated the launch of the observational style of filmmaking pioneered by French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, Canada’s Candid Eye filmmakers, and the British Free Cinema movement led by Lindsey Anderson and Tony Richardson. In his study of documentary film and the Cuban revolution, Michael Chanan argues: although the gritty observational-style filmmaking activities these varied documentary makers engaged in was not directly political in nature, it possessed a “spirit of aesthetic renewal” and a non-conformity that appealed to politically committed filmmakers of the period (2004:186).

Another development influencing the increased use of 16mm gauge film by committed filmmakers from the 1940s onwards was the arrival of television. Although the American Ampex Corporation had introduced video tape recorders to the television industry in the 1950s, the video machines used to record and play back television programming were large, and their use was limited to indoor use in television studios. As a consequence, 16mm film was pressed into service for the acquisition of footage for use in television based news and current affairs programs.
This created a pool of skilled 16mm film technicians, film laboratories, and a pool of surplus film equipment, which could be accessed by political filmmakers those who sought to use these resources for their own purposes.

**Anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism**

In the three decades following the Second World War, the international geopolitical landscape was dramatically reshaped as region after region sought independence from European colonial rule, and as the U.S. and U.S.S.R. ascended to the status of global superpowers. As this landscape was reshaped, the pervasive legacy of colonialism (in the form of neo-colonialism) and the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism became central areas for leftwing political struggle. For committed filmmakers, shifts in international geopolitical conditions led, in Asia, Africa, and parts of Central America and the Caribbean, to the making of films designed to serve the needs of movements seeking to shake off European colonial rule. During the same period, in Latin America, where between the 1950s and 1970s, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, Brazil and Argentina experienced pendulum-like political swings between rule by populist leftist regimes and rule by right wing military dictatorships, it led to the making of films supporting leftwing struggles against imperialism.

An incident in the summer of 1945 involving Joris Ivens foreshadowed the entrance of themes of colonialism and neo-colonialism to the field of committed film production. Immediately after the defeat of the Nazis in Europe, the Dutch government announced that the Netherlands was committed to the liberation of its
colonies in Indonesia from the Japanese, with the eventual aim of creating an independent self-governing Indonesian state. To create a film document of the liberation and the creation of this new state, the Dutch government appointed Ivens as the Film Commissioner for Indonesia and furnished him with film equipment and a significant filmmaking budget.

In August, as a Dutch fleet stood ready in Australia to begin the liberation, the Indonesian people declared their own independence. Responding to this move, a Dutch fleet sailed to blockade Indonesia until an authorized liberation could be staged. Watching these events from the dockside in Australia, Ivens charged that he had been hired to film the liberation of Indonesia and since this was not happening he was no longer working for the Dutch government. Instead, he collaborated with Australian dockworkers’ unions to make *Indonesia Calling* (1946, 23mins), which depicts dockside organizing by the Australian unions and members of the Indonesian national liberation movement in opposition to the Dutch government’s plans.

Filmed in black and white, with a voice-of-god narration, dramatic scored music, and a mixture of documentary and staged docudrama film footage, *Indonesia Calling* is a remarkable depiction of solidarity between international workers and the Indonesian national liberation movement. The film begins with newsreel footage from October 1945 showing the departure of the liner Esperance Bay, carrying 1,400 Indonesian nationalists to Indonesia with guarantees from the Australian government that they will not be landed in a Dutch controlled port. In the first of the film’s two short synchronized-sound sequences, the film depicts E.V. Elliott of the Australian
seamen’s union as he delivers a speech in support of the Indonesian nationalists. Over images of the Esperance Bay as it sails, the film’s narrator announces: “The real story is of ships that didn’t sail, let’s start at the beginning.” This prompts the film to jump back in time to provide, in its first section, an account of the history of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and the ties between the Australian and Indonesian people; followed by, in the film’s second and longer section, a dramatic account of the efforts of Australian and international workers to prevent the Dutch from reinstating their rule in Indonesia.

The film’s first section, which makes up approximately one-third of its runtime, begins by presenting a series of images of Indonesians in Australia as the narrator explains that the two peoples have been allies in a shared fight against Japanese fascism. Accompanying a visual image sequence featuring maps of the region, the film’s narrator explains how the Dutch have exploited Indonesia’s natural resources for three and a half centuries. This ‘background providing’ section of the film concludes with the narrator stating that if the Dutch are to reinstate their colonial rule of Indonesia “they will need ships.”

With this statement, the film enters its second section and, as the tempo of the editing increases, the narrator dramatically describes how in the summer of 1945 Indonesian sailors refused to take ships carrying arms to Indonesia. The narrator states: the “direct action” of these Indonesian sailors was quickly replicated by Australian “wharffies”, shipping clerks, and transport workers, all of whom refused to service the Dutch ships. The narrator states: “Something happened on the waterfront
which made all the difference in the life of a new republic. The Dutch companies who
once had a great fleet to carry the wealth from Indonesia, now had to beg for every
ship to take them back.”

This leads to the first of the film’s two dramatic boat sequences: the film
depicts Australian union organizers and a representative from the Dutch unions as
they circle Sydney Harbor in a tiny motorboat festooned with three huge
loudspeakers. From their motorboat, these union organizers appeal to the Dutch
soldiers who line the rails of a troopship, asking them to support Indonesian
independence. Unsuccessful in their efforts, the viewer hears on the film’s soundtrack
the soldiers ‘boooing’ as the narrator announces that the soldiers “didn’t want to hear
the truth.”

This sequence is soon followed by the second of the film’s two dramatic boat
sequences. Here, in a sequence composed primarily of staged footage, the film
depicts a shipping office where a group of Indonesian organizers and union officials
are monitoring which ships have succumbed to the workers’ campaign. These
individuals are then depicted rushing from their office to the harbor when they hear
that one ship, crewed by a mostly Indian crew, has taken to sea. Using staged footage
to depict this actual incident, the film shows these individuals chasing the departing
cargo ship in a small boat from which, using a bullhorn, they appeal to the Indian
crew, asking that the ship be returned to port. At first, it seems these efforts have been
unsuccessful and the viewer sees the ship disappear into the distance. But the narrator
then announces: “They’ve gone. But outside the head, to the throb of engines they
were thinking. Brothers. Indonesia’s fight is your fight. Stop Engines. STOP ENGINES!” In the next scene, the viewer sees, in footage which appears to be actual documentary footage of the real crew’s return to port, the Indian crew climbing off a small boat that has brought them back to the harbor. This is followed by the film’s second synchronized-sound sequence: in which one of the Indian crew declares their solidarity with the Indonesian people and states that the crew will not help the Dutch war effort.

The film concludes with a final short staged sequence featuring dockworkers, servicemen, and Indonesian nationals marching in unison across the Sydney Harbor Bridge to the accompaniment of rousing orchestral music. Over this sequence the narrator declares, “Below them, under the bridge lay the ships that didn’t sail, ships that didn’t sail so that a republic might live.” This bridge sequence concludes with a series of shots in which this group is shown marching in solidarity down the wide pedestrian steps leading to the bridge’s roadway. The sequence alludes to the depiction of the massacre on the steps in Odessa in Serge Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925, 75mins), except that in Ivens’ film it is the workers who march down the steps, unarmed, unified and victorious.

For opposing the Dutch government’s plans, Ivens became a persona non grata in his home country. The film was initially banned in Australia; but as popular support for the Indonesian cause grew the Australian government reversed this decision. Two copies of Indonesia Calling were eventually smuggled into Indonesia,
where they were shown to members of the nationalist forces as they engaged, until the following year, in a fight against British and Dutch forces (Barnouw 1974:172).

**Bread and dignity: Third Cinema**

In 1956, Fernando Birri returned to Argentina after completing his studies at Rome’s famed Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia film school. Birri, who had previously worked as a puppeteer, poet, and in the theater, planned to find a way to use film as a means to bring his creative endeavors to the widest possible audience. Settling in Santa Fé and working as a lecturer at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, he assigned his students the task of using still photography to document their surroundings. Birri recalls: “the idea was simply to venture forth with a still camera and any available tape recorder in search of one’s own environment—to converse with and photograph people, places, animals, plants, but mainly *problems* of one’s surroundings” (1986: 68). Although inspired by Italian neo-realist cinema, Birri deduced that the most pressing need in Argentina was the creation of a documentary filmmaking school; one able to foster the making of films depicting the life of the Argentine nation. In response to this need, Birri founded La Escola Documental de Santa Fé (The Documentary School of Santa Fé), the first documentary film school in Latin America.

The first film made by Birri and his students, titled *Throw Me a Dime* (*Tire dié*, 1958, 33mins), depicts the lives of Santa Fé street children who survive by begging for money from the passengers of trains, as the trains slowly cross a railroad
trestle on the outskirts of the city. The film depicts the children as they wait by the train tracks in anticipation of a train’s arrival; it then segues to the shantytowns where the children live with their families and where, through a series of interviews with the children’s parents and other shantytown residents, the film reveals the extreme poverty faced by the city’s poor. The film climaxes with the arrival of a train on the trestle and, in a dramatic rapidly edited sequence, the children, risking with one misstep falling to the riverbed below, jump from girder to girder chasing the train across the trestle while calling through the train’s open windows to the passengers inside, “Tire dié! Tire dié!”

In the class stratified Argentine society of the 1950s, *Throw Me a Dime*’s depiction of poverty and the lives of ordinary people (two themes which were suppressed in the national imagination and went unseen on the nation’s cinema screens) was a radical affront to Argentina’s bourgeois class sensibilities. The process behind the making of *Throw Me a Dime* was also unconventional for its time: anticipating the participatory filmmaking approaches adopted by grassroots documentary making groups a decade later, Birri divided his fifty-nine students into groups, and assigned each group to concentrate on a particular individual featured in the film. When the first rough edit of the film was ready, Birri and his colleagues organized screenings in the slums of Santa Fé, where they asked the audience which parts of the film were effective and which were not. These audience responses influenced the editing of the film’s final thirty-three minute version.
Birri’s stated goal was to create a political cinema that would be national, critical, and realist. His reasoning was simple: a national cinema was needed as an alternative to the Hollywood films which dominated Argentine cinema screens; a critical cinema was needed to reveal the injustices faced by Argentina’s working classes and the poor; and a realist cinema was needed since, Birri argued, the depiction of real social conditions is a necessary pre-condition to social change. Birri proposed that realism, in the form of documentary film or the neo-realist fiction films that had inspired him during his studies in Italy, is especially well suited to these three goals (Birri 1986b:80). To exhibit the films made at the documentary school, Birri drew on his past experiences as a theater performer and built a primitive mobile film theater that could be driven to poor neighborhoods to host film screenings in the street.

The making of *Throw me a dime* and the formation of La Escola Documental de Santa Fé were seminal moments towards the emergence of what would become known as The New Latin American Cinema. This cinema movement was fostered from the 1950s onwards by the creation of film societies, cine clubs and the publishing of film journals in countries throughout the region, and by the launch of key film festivals for the exhibition of Latin American films (Burton 1990:18). This cinema movement emerged, Birri argues, because there was a generation filmmakers working in countries in Latin America:

who wanted to provide a reply to some of the problems of the moment, and who brought with them more questions than answers. They were questions that came from an historical necessity, a necessity in the history of our peoples; in
The history of people awakening with great strength to the consciousness of occupying their place in history, a place denied us for so many years (1986:79).

The movement was born of the particular circumstances of the period and sought, in the words of Birri, to bring the people of Latin America to a place of “bread and dignity” (1986:79). Birri argued: for this to occur there must be no “abyss between life and the screen,” and Latin filmmakers must create a cinema where the spectator is an active participant in processes of social change and not simply the passive consumer of onscreen film narratives (1986:81).

Although The New Latin American Cinema movement was not limited to the making of documentary films and many fiction films were produced, documentaries were ferociously embraced by filmmakers linked to the movement. Julianne Burton argues: for radical Latin American filmmakers of this period, documentary served as “a primary tool in the search to discover and define the submerged, denied, devalued realities of an intricate palimpsest of cultures and castes separated and conjoined by an arbitrary network of national boundaries” (1990:6). Among the key documentary makers linked to the movement are Argentina’s Gerardo Vallejo, Fernando Solanos, and Raymundo Gleyzer of the Cinema Liberación group, Bolivia’s Ukamau Group with Jorge Sanjinés, Chile’s Patricio Guzman, Cuba’s García Espinosa, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Santaigo Alavarez, and the Spanish born but Argentina based Octavio Getino.

In the 1960s, the practices of these leftwing filmmakers led to the coining of the term ‘Third Cinema’: this term was initially used to describe the activities of
militant leftwing filmmakers in Latin American, but was later adopted to describe the works of similarly intentioned fiction and nonfiction filmmakers worldwide. The first reference to the term Third Cinema appeared in the Cuban film journal *Cine Cubano* in March 1969 in the context of an interview with members of the Argentine Cine Liberación film group founded by Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino (Getino 1986:100). The group proposed that Third Cinema:

would be a cinema of aggression, a cinema that would put an end to the irrationality that has come before it, an agit cinema. This does not mean that filmmakers should take on exclusively political or revolutionary themes, but that their films would thoroughly explore all aspects of life in Latin America today. This cinema, revolutionary in both its formulation and its consciousness, would invent a new cinematic language, in order to create a new consciousness and new social reality (Getino 1986:100).

The term Third Cinema refers to three forms of cinema production: the ‘first cinema’ is the classical cinema produced by Hollywood and the European film industries. The ‘second cinema’ is auteur-driven cinema, for instance the work of French New Wave directors Jean Lu Godard and François Truffaut, which, although it had emerged in opposition to classical cinema, was, the Latin filmmakers argued, nonetheless conflicted politically, bourgeois in its leanings, and lacking a popular base of support. Third Cinema was intended to overcome the limitations of second cinema by directly confronting political events and engaging, through the use of film as a tool of direct political action delivered through grassroots distribution networks, in direct dialogue with audience members (Getino 1986).
Putting these theories into practice, Solanos and Getino created the first masterwork of The New Latin American Cinema movement, *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La Hora de los hornos*, 1968, 260mins).\textsuperscript{vii} This epic film is a radical Marxist thesis chronicling Argentina’s history of revolution and counter-revolution during the post-war period. Divided into three parts: *Part 1: Neo Colonialism and Violence* presents a history of Argentine life and the activities of the nation’s leftwing social movements; *Part 2: An Act For Revolution* traces the presidency of Juan Peron between 1945-1955 and the activities of the popular Peronist movement after Peron’s fall from power; and *Part 3: Violence and Liberation* explores the role of violence in revolutionary struggle.

Both polemical and poetic in its construction, to jolt the viewer into political action, *The Hour of the Furnaces* bombards viewers with a complex montage of imagery and titles, while seeking to assault hegemonic preconceptions regarding reality and the nature of political life. The film provides an illustration of what Solanos and Getino termed, in their key theoretical text on radical filmmaking “Towards a Third Cinema,” a “cinema of revolution” (1997). The two filmmakers argue: “the cinema of revolution is at the same time one of deconstruction and construction: destruction of the image that neocolonialism has created of itself and of us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in any of its expressions” (1997:46).

During the turbulent years of the late 1960s, *The Hour of the Furnaces* had immense influence internationally among leftwing filmmakers. Inside Argentina, the
film was exhibited through “decentralized parallel circuits” of distribution involving unannounced guerilla style community based screenings using a portable film projector and electric generator (Getino1986:103). This was a remarkable achievement, given the film’s clear opposition to the ruling dictatorship, and it was made possible by the pre-existing presence of a strong network of Peronist supporters in the trade union movement and among youth organizations and community groups. Getino argues: this semi-covert distribution through a preexisting social movement network illustrated that a film aimed at fostering revolution and liberation could be made and distributed inside a “non-liberated country” (1986:103).

Similar grassroots distribution strategies were adopted by other Third Cinema filmmakers: in Bolivia, according to Jorge Sanjinés of the Ukamau Group, the Ukamau Group was able, using a similar parallel distribution strategy, to exhibit their films for approximately 340,000 workers, peasants and students in one year (1997:69). A single film, Blood of the Condor (Yawar mallku, 1969, 85mins), was screened for close to 250,000 people. Sanjinés argues that film distribution of this kind took films out of “static movie houses devoted to sterile pleasure” so that they could serve as a part of a collective revolutionary movement (1997:70).

The Third Cinema movement influenced filmmakers in African, Asia, and Latin America, and attracted the attention of Third World peoples living in the metropolitan centers of Europe and America. In style, Third Cinema filmmakers initially employed film realism and operated from the belief that it was enough to simply depict the reality of life for workers and the disenfranchised. But this approach
changed over the course of the 1960s, and in the place of realism emerged radical reportage, newsreel and agitprop film styles. Key among these was didactic cinema: a film form motivated not by a desire to depict the world as it already is, but instead to provide a radical film intervention into the viewer’s world and consciousness. Where film realism forefronts a depiction of the pre-existent and therefore risks the presentation of naïve realism, a didactic cinema seeks to challenge the viewer’s preconceptions about reality by fostering previously unknown ways of viewing these ‘real’ conditions and processes. A didactic cinema should, Getino argues, press the viewer to re-think, re-evaluate, and confront taken-for-granted features of the historical circumstances in which they live (1986). Didactic and other approaches to filmmaking led Third Cinema filmmakers to develop bold and richly poetic film aesthetics as they sought to destroy the film grammar of ‘bourgeois’ cinema and establish in its place a radical sensibility, one appropriate to the use of cinema as a revolutionary art form.

In Havana, working at Cuba’s Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, ICAIC), filmmaker Santiago Alvarez responded to this goal by developing a dynamic style of film montage in his work, often using still images appropriated from American news magazines or moving images pirated from Miami television broadcasts and foreign made documentaries or newsreels. ICAIC was founded just three months after the Cuban revolution, and documentary filmmakers working at ICAIC sought to liberate
the documentary from the heavy-handed paternalism that pervaded narration-driven Grierson-style documentaries (Chanan 2004). viii

Alvarez traces the beginning of his political consciousness to his experiences as a dishwasher and coalminer in Pennsylvania in the late 1930s and 1940s. On his return to Cuba, he became an active participant in the underground movement against the rule of General Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship, and a founder of the Nuestro Tiempo film society. Here, alongside other key ICAIC filmmakers of the 1960s, including Alfredo Guevara, Julio Garcia Espinosa, and Tomas Gutierrez Alea, Alvarez studied American and European classical cinema and saw some Soviet films of the 1920s. After the Cuban revolution, Alvarez was appointed as the editor of the Latin American Weekly Newsreel. Although he had no knowledge of the montage techniques of Dziga Vertov or Esfir Shub until later in his film career, the film style he developed for his work exhibits features in common with the work of these Soviet filmmakers.

In his classic short film NOW (1965, 6mins), Alvarez presents for the viewer a montage of still images depicting racism and racial violence in America, accompanied by Lena Horne singing the song “Now”. In the film, the camera zooms and pans across the still images to show the distorted faces of civil rights protestors as they are beaten and arrested by police. As the tempo of the soundtrack speeds up, the viewer sees images of the Klu Klux Klan, an American neo-Nazi rally, horrifying images of a lynching, and images of African Americans dressed in symbolic chains as they march for voting rights. As the final lyric of the soundtrack crescendos with the
line “the time is now,” machine gun bullets puncture the screen typing out the word “now”. For its impact, NOW relies on rapid and rhythmic editing and Alvarez exhibits a willingness to shock his audience with sharp visual contrasts and images of brutality.

For the even more shocking but nonetheless still poetic opening sequence of his film 79 Springtimes for Ho Chi Minh (1969, 25mins), Alvarez juxtaposed time-lapse footage depicting the petals of a flower opening with slow-motion images of the opening of the petal-like tail-fins of American bombs as they descend on a Vietnamese village. The sequence establishes the basic theme of Alvarez’s film homage to the Vietnamese leader; one of juxtaposing the dignity and hope of Ho and the Vietnamese people with the brutal repression and violence of American militarism in South East Asia. In one extraordinary sequence of the film depicting fighting between North Vietnamese soldiers and the U.S. Army, the film itself seems to burn, and the film’s sprockets are seen to be pulled to the center of the frame as the film’s emulsion appears to blister and melt. Symbolically, it is as though the viewer is no longer separated from the scenes on screen by the distance of history or the film apparatus. Instead, the viewer, the disintegrating film, and the violence depicted on screen co-mingle in a co-existent present. It is a jarring and disarming sequence: one that strips the viewer of a comfortable distance from the scenes on screen.\textsuperscript{ix}

In a turbulent political landscape characterized by military coups, militant filmmaking in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s carried with it the risk of severe political repression. In the early 1960s, Argentine officials labeled Birri’s
documentary school a “center for subversive activities” \(^x\) and in 1962 the school’s film *The 40 Quarters* (*Los 40 cuartos*, 1962 n.r.t.), depicting overcrowding in Argentine slums, was confiscated and banned. (Birri 1986:72). In 1963, with the collapse of President Arturo Frondizi’s moderate government and the subsequent installation of the military regime, Birri found it prudent to leave Argentina and, in a semi clandestine fashion, escaped to Brazil where he lived until the 1964 military coup there drove him to Mexico, Cuba and finally Italy. \(^{xi}\)

In Chile, the 1973 military coup against the nation’s populist president Salvador Allende became the subject of the second masterwork of the New Latin American Cinema: Patricio Guzmán’s trilogy *The Battle of Chile: Parts 1, 2 & 3* (1974, 1977, 184mins, 1979, 78mins). With a running time of over four hours, the collected parts of *The Battle of Chile* offer a complex portrait of a populist leftist regime facing collapse, the rise of a rightwing opposition movement, and the eventual coup d’état against Allende by the Chilean military under the command of General Augusto Pinochet. Footage for the film was assembled by six filmmakers working over a ten-month period prior to and during the initial stages of the coup. *The Battle of Chile, Part 1: The Insurrection of the Bourgeoisie* chronicles the tactics employed by the Chilean rightwing as they seek to bring down Allende’s democratically elected Populist Unity (PU) government. Bosses slow manufacturing production to ferment economic instability, a massive right wing orchestrated strike is launched to halt production in Chile’s key copper mining industry, a parliamentary boycott is staged by rightwing officials, and the corporate owned mainstream news media announces
the success of the military coup even before it has occurred. *Part 1* forcefully illustrates that once the Chilean democratic system no longer served the interests of the bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie was willing to overthrow democracy and install a dictatorship to serve its interests. In a bloody foretelling of the military coup to follow, part one of the trilogy ends with the image of a Chilean soldier firing his gun directly into the lens of the camera; the bullets fired killed Leonardo Henrickson, the Argentinean cameraman behind the lens.

*The Battle of Chile Part 2: The Coup d’Etat* depicts the Chilean left in disarray: despite the mass support Allende has among the Chilean people, the film shows that a lack consensus among the left allows the right to methodically seize power. The film ends with footage of the military assault on the presidential palace, the death of Allende, and a televised presentation broadcast shortly afterwards by the nation’s new military junta.

Less dramatic than the first two parts, *Part 3: The Power of the People* covers the period before the coup d’état as the leftwing PU party and its allies try to equitably distribute power and resources to the Chilean people. It depicts the local organizing activities of ordinary Chileans as they work together to build social service organizations for the distribution of food, to oppose black market profiteering, and to collectively continue production at farms and factories at which the owners have stopped production in the hope of fermenting a national economic crisis.

Explaining the purpose of *The Battle of Chile*, Guzmán argues, the goal was to make “an analytical film, not an agitational one” (1986:51). Guzmán and the other
filmmakers involved in the project believed that if a coup or civil war occurred, the
PU coalition would eventually win and the film would be of “great use to the
workers, the peasantry, and the Chilean left as a whole because in the first stage of
constructing a new socialist state, it is very important to analyze what has gone
before” (Guzmán 1986:52). Instead, the coup ousted the PU and the film, completed
by Guzmán in exile, was banned in Chile. The Battle of Chile offers viewers an ominous depiction of the fragility of democratic
processes in the face of an organized and military backed opposition movement.

Films against the war in Vietnam

The war in Vietnam prompted the production of numerous documentary films,
although many of these were designed to serve as television news reportage. Even
among films intended to present no partisan position vis-à-vis the war, there were
images almost certain to stir viewers to question the necessity or morality of the war.
One of the most extraordinary examples of a documentary depicting American
combat involvement in Vietnam is The Anderson Platoon (1967, 65mins), directed by
Pierre Schoendoerffer for French television. While serving as a film cameraman in
the French Army, Schoendoerffer had filmed the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in
1954. Captured by the Viet Minh after the French surrender, he was held as a prisoner
of war and his exposed reels of film were lost. A decade later Schoendoerffer
returned to Vietnam, and drawing on his combat experience he joined and filmed an
American platoon in the field over a six-week period. The resulting observational
style documentary follows the lives, confusion, and growing brutalization of the young American soldiers as they patrol from village to village seeking an enemy they can neither find nor understand. In a film sequence that serves as a powerful metaphor for the pointless destruction that accompanied American involvement in the region, the rotors of a bulbous American helicopter clip the treetops as it takes off from a jungle landing strip and the machine plummets to the ground in a storm of flying metal and broken machinery. Cuba compilation filmmaker Alvarez later appropriated the footage, using it repeatedly to ridicule America’s military ‘superiority’, to devastating effect.

In 1965, the Japanese documentary maker Junichi Ushiyama spent a month in the field with a battalion of the South Vietnamese army, and from the footage he filmed made three television documentaries. The last of these, *With a South Vietnamese Marine Battalion* (*Minami Betonamu Kaihedidaitai Senki*, 1965, 60 mins), was one of the first films to document the atrocities occurring in Vietnam. The film showed South Vietnamese soldiers scouring village after village in search of Viet Cong insurgents but finding only women and children. In the isolated instances when male villagers are found, the film documents the brutal interrogations these individuals faced. In one scene from the film, a South Vietnamese officer hacks off the head of a prisoner: the television airing of this brutal scene led to the cancellation of Ushiyama’s film series at the request of the Japanese government (Barnouw 1974:279).
Although films such as these were in circulation internationally, many of them were refused airing by American television stations. Documentary film scholar Eric Barnouw argues that although the war in Vietnam featured prominently in American news reports and became a part of the nation’s daily television news diet, the incomplete nature of this coverage meant that ultimately the television coverage served to support the U.S. government’s stance on the war (1974). He argues: “What was missing from the television picture was a real sense of the duplicities that had been used to launch the war, the horrors it was inflicting on the people of Vietnam, and its corrupting influence on America itself” (Barnouw 1974:274). North Vietnamese documentary or propaganda films which might have provided viewers with access to some of the missing pieces of this picture were banned in America; although a few of these films were clandestinely imported by the leftwing Newsreel film group and exhibited on college campuses, most attempts to bring North Vietnamese films to the U.S. ended with their confiscation by customs agents.

A glimpse of the content of these films reveals why the U.S. government might seek to prevent their exhibition in America: *A Day of Plane Hunting* (Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Vietnam, 1968, 20mins) and *Women of Telecommunications Station #6* (Vietnamese People’s Army Films, 1969, 20mins) depict North Vietnamese people engaged in a well organized populist resistance to American aggression, while *U.S. Techniques and Genocide in Vietnam* (*Tôi ác chiến trận cua Mỹ o Việt-Nam*, Vietnamese People’s Army Films, 1968, 35mins) offers of blow by blow account of the hi-tech weapons of mass destruction used by the U.S.
Army and U.S. Air Force. With the nauseating detail of a medical film, this last film shows the effects of cluster bomb pellets, air dropped anti-personnel mines, and napalm, on the mangled bodies of their victims.

Based in East Germany, the film production company Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Schuemann (H&S) was the first foreign filmmaking group permitted to film in North Vietnam by the communist government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Between 1966 and 1978 the group produced fourteen documentaries opposing the war or exploring its aftermath; for airing on state controlled television in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or in cinemas where they were screened before the main feature (Alter 2002:15). The group’s first Vietnam themed film, 400cm³ (1966, 5mins), made in East Germany, was designed to encourage blood donation in the GDR for the North Vietnamese (the title refers to the cubic measurement of blood donated by each donor). The film sufficiently impressed representatives of the DRV that H&S were provided with visas to enter North Vietnam, where they filmed Pilots in Pajamas (1968, four segments ranging from 60-90mins), a film composed of lengthy interviews with downed American pilots. In the filmed interviews, the filmmakers challenge the pilots to explain their justification for repeatedly participating in bombing missions over Vietnam. In the ensuing film, although the pilots are frank and reflective on many issues, on the issue of personal culpability they consistently argue that they were simply obeying orders. Audiences in the communist controlled GDR reportedly saw similarities between the pilot’s responses and similar excuses made by Nazi war criminals in the aftermath of the
Second World War (Alter 2002:40). Conversely, it is unclear whether the pilots depicted were equipped to give ‘consent’ to the interviews filmed by H&S, and whether the filming of these prisoners of war was a violation of international law. When NBC broadcast part of H&S’ Pilots in Pajamas in the U.S. the phrase “communist material” was superimposed over the image (Lewis 2000:80).

Other more agitprop films by H&S include: Remington Cal. 12 (1972, 15mins), in which the group edited together images drawn from advertisements for Remington brand shotguns, scenes from the heroic Hollywood made Vietnam war film The Green Berets (Ray Kellogg & John Wayne, 1968, 141mins), and images of red-dye filled pumpkins repeatedly blasted by shotgun fire. The film was intended to draw attention to the use of shotguns by the U.S. military in Vietnam, in violation of the Geneva Convention. In another H&S film, a short titled 100 (1971, 6mins), a man performs push-ups to the point of exhaustion. The image alludes to reports that during U.S. Marine training, recruits who referred to the Vietnamese people as Vietnamese and not as a “dog, pig or monkey” were punished with one hundred push-ups (Alter 2002:23).

During the two world wars documentary film served as a tool of propaganda for the warring nations; during America’s war in Vietnam, independently made documentary films became a tool for mobilizing opposition to the war. Working in Paris, Ivens produced 17th Parallel (17e Parallèle, 1967, 113mins) and The People and Their Guns (Le Peuple et ses Fusils, 1970, 97mins), which portrayed the life of the North Vietnamese people at war. For the making of his masterly In the Year of the
*Pig* (1968, 101mins), American compilation filmmaker Emile de Antonio retrieved footage from the archives of the French military, American TV stations and the North Vietnamese government, to construct a historical account of French and American imperial involvement in Vietnam from the 1930s to the communist Tet offensive of 1968. Through the recycling and montage of these film fragments, de Antonio creates a film which serves as a “document dossier,” in the process revealing for the viewer the previously unseen processes and historical expedients that shaped French and American conduct in the region (Waugh 1976). Explaining his motivation in making *In the Year of the Pig*, de Antonio argues: “I wanted to make an intellectual weapon to be used against our war in Vietnam” (1999:99).xiii On his use of footage borrowed from TV broadcasts, he adds: “TV [is] where the war was being hidden by making it a part of our daily news programming, sticking the burning villages between deodorant and Cadillac commercials. By making it quotidian, TV made it go away. I wanted to bring it back” (1999:100).xiv When it was released in 1968, at the height of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, some theaters showing *In the Year of the Pig* were vandalized and others were the focus of bomb threats. In Philadelphia, where the film was scheduled to be the first film exhibited in a new theater, the police closed the theater for two weeks saying the fire exits were inadequate. De Antonio reported that one of the police officers involved stated the theater’s closing was because “of those Vietnamese pictures you are playing” (Picard 2000:212).

Anti-Vietnam War filmmaking efforts addressed a variety of themes: the 1971 ‘Connie Stay Home’ campaign, orchestrated by San Diego based anti-war organizers
to stop the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Constellation from sailing to Vietnam from its home base in San Diego, led to the making of the documentary *Connie Stay Home* (1971, n.r.t.). The film chronicles the campaign over one year, and climaxes with a public vote by San Diego residents on whether the ship should sail or not. In the vote, eighty-two percent of respondents, including a large number of the military personnel living in the city, indicate that they did not want to see the ship go to Vietnam.

In the same year, the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War hosted the Detroit Winter Soldier Investigation at which hundreds of U.S. veterans assembled to testify to the atrocities they had witnessed or had participated in while serving in Vietnam. Fifteen filmmakers working under the collective banner of the Winter Film Collective filmed the testimony presented during the three-day investigation. This footage was intercut with interviews conducted with some of the individual soldiers present at the investigation, to make the feature length documentary *Winter Soldier* (Winter Film Collective, 1971, 90mins). Largely ignored by the press and distributors in the U.S. the film won awards at the Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals and was independently distributed among anti-war groups and on college campuses.

In France, opposition to the war in Vietnam led filmmaker Chris Marker to co-produce, under the umbrella of the organization Society for Launching New Works (Société pour la Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles, SLON), the documentary *Far From Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*, 1967, 115mins). As both a film critic and the director of elegant montage films (released under various pseudonyms, Chris Marker
being one of them), Marker had been a feature of the French film world since the late 1940s, but *Far From Vietnam*, with its blend of agitprop newsreels, fictional episodes, and documentary footage depicting international responses to the war, indicated a shift towards the making of explicitly agitprop films by Marker. *Far From Vietnam* was immediately followed by *The Sixth Face of the Pentagon* (*La Sixième face du Pentagone*, 1968, 28mins), filmed by Marker when he participated in October 21st 1967 anti-war protest at the Pentagon.

As the tumultuous French student and workers protests of May 1968 unfolded, Marker’s political filmmaking activities extended beyond the making of films opposed to the war in Vietnam. An invitation from striking textile workers in Besançon in Southwest France led Marker to co-direct *Hope To See You Soon* (*A Bientôt, j’espère*, 1968, 55mins), depicting the efforts of workers to introduce workplace changes that would give them more control over their lives (Lupton 2006:116). The making of this film led to the creation of a workers’ filmmaking collective at the factory, called the Medvedkin Group. This name was adopted in honor of Alexander Medvedkin, a participant in the Soviet Union’s cine trains of the 1930s. It was an apt connection: as Medvedkin recounts on-camera in Marker’s documentary about the cine trains, *The Train Rolls On* (*Le Train en marche*, Chris Marker, 1971, 32mins), the film train was a modified three car train containing a film laboratory, editing rooms, a small screening room, and accommodation for its staff of thirty-two. The train’s purpose was to travel around the country to document on film how collective farms and factories were operated. Films depicting conditions at
locations where things were going well for workers and where productivity was high
would be screened for workers at other locations where there were problems, so that
they could learn from the successes of others. At locations where problems existed,
film could also be used as a tool for self-examination, one that allowed workers to
view and reflect on the problems in their workplace. These self-examination
processes placed at the fore decision-making on the part of workers as they, in
collective and non-hierarchical ways, sought to develop solutions to the workplace
problems they face.

For the Besançon factory workers, Medvedkin’s use of film in the Soviet
Union offered an inspiring model, and the Besançon Medvedkin Group’s first film,
titled *Lessons in Struggle (Classe de lutte, 1969, 36mins)*, explores grassroots labor
organizing and ways that workers can take control of their workplace. A second
Medvedkin Group was soon formed in the town of Sochaux, home to the Peugeot
auto factory, and in seven years of operation the two Medvedkin Groups made a
dozen films (Lupton 2005:117).

An incipient feature of the work of Marker and many other leftwing
filmmakers during this period was distrust of the mainstream media, its perceived
bourgeois ideological leanings, and its capitalist underpinnings. Thus, SLON and the
Medvedkin Group wanted to make films outside the organizational hierarchies of the
film or television industries and sought to make the tools of film production
accessible to dissenting groups or workers so that they could communicate directly
with their constituents without the intervention of conventional media gatekeepers (Lupton 2005:111).

**Newsreel**

The birth of the leading leftwing American filmmaking group of the 1960s came in direct response to the perceived shortcomings of the mainstream media’s coverage of the war in Vietnam and the opposition movements mobilized to oppose it. Founded in New York City in December 1967, Newsreel formed in response to the poor coverage the massive October 21, 1967 anti-war protest at the Pentagon received in the mainstream news media, including the media’s failure to show the military police’s brutal treatment of protestors.

Newsreel’s initial membership of about fifty was composed of European-American students from the anti-war movement, including many with links to Students For a Democratic Society (SDS). At the time of its founding, the group had three core goals: first, to regularly make and quickly circulate newsreel films depicting current events. Second: to make longer and more thoroughly conceived films exploring pressing individual issues. And third: to make films that would educate the masses in the ways of grassroots political organizing. (Downing 1984:126). In the group’s years of operation, the latter two of these goals were achieved, but the group was never able to produce newsreel films on a regular basis.
The formation of the New York Newsreel group was immediately followed by the launch of a companion group in San Francisco and the formation of smaller regional groups in Boston, Los Angeles, and Kingston (Ontario, Canada). The regional groups were less active than the main groups in New York and San Francisco; for instance, the Los Angeles group organized screenings of Newsreel’s films and theorized the filmmaking process, but made no actual films (Downing 1984:128).

The New York and San Francisco groups quickly aligned with the racial justice and ‘power’ movements of the period, and Newsreel’s films presented early favorable depictions of the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and militant Chicano and Asian advocacy groups. Reflecting on her involvement with New York Newsreel, Iris Morales of the Young Lords remembers: Newsreel was “only film group representing Puerto Rican and Chicano experience at the time” (2004, January 24). On her involvement with the group, former Black Panther Party communications director Kathleen Cleaver argues, “we were in a revolution… [for Newsreel’s members] there was no sense that they were filmmakers and separate to the struggle, they were participants” (2004, January 24). Filmmaker Tami Gold, who worked with the New York group, argues: “we weren’t filmmaker wannabes,” we had a “passion for change… we were proud to use the word propaganda.” She adds: “we didn’t talk social change, we talked revolution” (2004, January 24).

Two early productions by the group are the films *Black Panther* (1968, 20mins), made by San Francisco Newsreel, and *Columbia Revolt* (1969, 50mins)
made by New York Newsreel. *Black Panther* became one of Newsreel’s most widely distributed films. At a time of violent state repression against black radicals, the film depicted the Black Panther Party’s activities as a legitimate and necessary response to the brutal oppression of America’s black populace. Featuring interviews with Black Panther leaders Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, and Bobby Seale, and footage of party members engaged in military style drilling and protests outside the Alameda County jail where Newtown was incarcerated, the film presented for viewers the Black Panther Party’s 10-point plan to end the oppression of blacks.

Also widely distributed, the film *Columbia Revolt*, an early production by New York Newsreel, provides a blow-by-blow account of the occupation of Columbia University by students during the summer of 1968. The protesting students were opposed to the university’s sponsorship of the Institute for Defense Analysis, which provided services for the military in Vietnam, and the planned construction of a new gymnasium in a local park serving Harlem’s black residents. Filmed in black and white, *Columbia Revolt* provides an anatomical account of the revolt including a depiction of the occupation of university buildings on the Morningside Heights Columbia campus and the eventual ejection of the students from the campus by Billy-club wielding police officers.

Because the filmmakers did not have access to synchronized-sound recording equipment, the film contains neither interviews nor podium speeches. Instead its audio track features short clips of overdubbed testimony from revolt participants; these serve as the film’s informal narrated commentary. In this testimony, the
unidentified witnesses heard on the film’s audio track describe their motivations for participating in the protest, the conditions inside the occupied buildings and, as the protest unfolds, they describe the emergence of divisions between the moderate stance of the European American students involved and more the militant stance of adopted by participating African American students. In this way, and very effectively, the story of the revolt is told anonymously in the words of unnamed and unseen students; thereby presenting the revolt as a mass popular action rather than one embodied in the words or actions of any one named individual or leader. *Columbia Revolt* provides a powerful depiction of political efficacy on the part of students, and shows how students at Columbia were radicalized through confrontation with the police and the university’s bureaucracy. For Newsreel, *Columbia Revolt* was an important early film and, as student protests against the war in Vietnam blossomed on college campuses across America, rental fees from its distribution to colleges provided an early measure of financial stability for the group.

On the west coast, among the other early films by San Francisco Newsreel were *People’s Park* (1969, 25mins), depicting the successful combined efforts of students and Berkeley residents to stop the University of California from bulldozing a local community-serving park, and *Richmond Oil Strike* (1969, 15mins), depicting a strike by the mostly European American workers at the massive Standard Oil refinery on the East Bay. The latter was one of Newsreel’s most blue collar-focused films, and a precursor to California Newsreels’ 1970s focus on making films exploring new models for workplace democratization and the empowerment of workers. Other films
by Newsreel, such as *Mill In* (1968, 12min), made in New York, capture a more humorous and quixotic side of 1960s counterculture protest. *Mill In* depicts a Christmas Eve anti-war protest on Fifth Avenue in New York City where protestors sought to raise the consciousness of the public by simply ‘milling around’ on streets and sidewalks, thereby disrupting traffic and hampering the movement of holiday shoppers.

Inside the New York group there were competing opinions about both the kind of films Newsreel should make and about the relationship Newsreel should have with the wider social movement activities unfolding around them. One faction proposed that Newsreel should serve as a media-wing for the radical student, anti-war and racial justice movements, and in this role the group should produce regular reportage-style reports on current events. An illustration of this approach is provided by *Newsreel #17: Chicago Convention Challenge* (1968, 17mins), depicting the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE) organized, and SDS backed, protest at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The Chicago protest was, in terms of the number of people attending, a fairly small event with only a few thousand experienced protestors present to voice their opposition to what they saw as the Democratic Party’s imperialist policies in Vietnam and racist policies at home. But the Chicago police’s brutal attack of protestors in full view of the mainstream media’s television cameras, and the subsequent convention walkout by Democrats sympathetic to the protest, transformed the protest into a watershed moment in the anti-war movement.
Using black and white film footage and synchronized-sound, *Newsreel #17: Chicago Convention Challenge* is an elegantly made documentary which presents a blow-by-blow account of the four-day protest. The film combines observational style footage of protestors and their organizing efforts, a low-key voice-of-god narration explaining the anatomy of the protest as it unfolds, and a musical soundtrack featuring such songs as “Street Fighting Man” by The Rolling Stones and “Kick Out the Jams” by MC5. The film culminates on the last day of the protest, as protestors assemble outside the Hilton Hotel where the Democratic Convention is in session and where the Chicago police violently beat and arrest protestors. Although the film’s narration does offer some reflection on the connections between the events depicted and the wider anti-war movement (for instance, the film ends with an appeal for people to develop unified strategies for working together in the future), the overall focus of the film is on providing a reportage-style depiction of the major events of the protest, rather than providing an analysis of these events or an attempt to situate them within the larger frame of the anti-war movement and its goals.

The weakness of *Newsreel #17: Chicago Convention Challenge* (as with other Newsreel films focusing on the depiction of protests) is that it makes no effort to persuade viewers who are not already convinced of the necessity for some type of action, that action of the kind depicted is warranted. In addition, *Newsreel #17: Chicago Convention Challenge*’s focus on dramatic and spectacular acts of streets protest omits any acknowledgement that sustained, disciplined, and long-term organizing activities are key to the realization of a social movement’s goals.
A second faction within Newsreel proposed that instead of engaging in newsreel making and jumping from issue to another on a week-by-week basis, the group should get deeply involved in the life of particular communities, and explore the issues faced by these communities through the making of comprehensive documentaries. Advocates for this second approach argued that sustained community immersion on the part of Newsreel would allow the group to develop a more complex theoretical and practical understanding of the challenges faced by specific oppressed communities, thereby enabling the making of films that could offer credible solutions to these challenges. In the end, neither of these strategies was fully embraced, and over time a fairly conventional auteur-centered production model prevailed in the group, rather than either the making of fully community immersed projects or the production of a regular newsreel series.

**Distributing Newsreel’s films**

In addition to distributing its own films, Newsreel set out to import and exhibit radical leftwing and Third Cinema films from overseas, including Marxist and anti-imperialist films from Cuba and North Korea and North Vietnamese propaganda films. Bill Nichols argues that while there were other distributors circulating films from these countries, Newsreel’s focus on the distribution of committed films was unique and “helped draw the American left into Third World struggle” (1984:137). The group also devoted considerable attention to the question of how films, whether made by Newsreel or by others, could be most effectively distributed. Initially,
Newsreel hoped to distribute films through a network of groups affiliated with SDS.

In a statement from January 1968, Newsreel proposed:

Our principal concern is the creation of what we call the community distribution network. This network is based on individuals and activist groups throughout the country, functioning as distributors at the grassroots level… The films become tools they use in the course of their work, and like any other tools, they help the group in their organizing work, and serve to bring the group into contact with more people.xviii

However, Newsreel was forced to modify its approach when it became clear that, within the decentralized and largely unstructured student anti-war movement, no such network existed. In April 1968, a second statement conceded that the fragmentary nature of the student movement precluded the possibility that a group such as Newsreel could distribute films in this way:

We deluded ourselves into thinking that… across the country there exists a monolithic movement called the ‘New Left’ with hundreds of dedicated organizers starving to death because they don’t have films to organize with… we should not longer be working under the impression that we are servicing any one group or organization.xix

Nonetheless, although there was little pre-existent movement-based infrastructure to help with the distribution of their films, Newsreel was successful in developing its own film distribution network.xx In his 1980 study of Newsreel, Nichols indicates that in 1974 the group had 2,000 bookings for films from their catalogue. Sixty percent of these bookings were from universities, with the others evenly split between political organizations and community groups. Paradoxically for Newsreel, college screenings,
which were considered to be of less importance politically than other screenings, were the big financial breadwinner for the group (Nichols 1980:32).

Newsreel also proposed that there was little to be gained in terms of political change by distributing their film catalogue to anonymous audiences in the way commercial films are distributed. Instead, film screenings must be sites of active engagement between the film and its viewers, and not sites of ‘passive’ film consumption. To foster dialogue among audience members at screenings, Newsreel formed a speaker’s bureau composed of Newsreel members who were assigned the role of facilitating pre and post-screening discussion sessions. Within the discussion-screening format developed, the “structure of the screening had as much priority as the structure of the film” (Nichols 1984:138). As former Newsreel member Gold argues: “we were not being trained to be filmmakers, we were trained to the organizers. It wasn’t the films that created change, it was the organizing” (Gold 2004, January 24).

The influence of Newsreel extended beyond the U.S. to play a role in inspiring similar militant filmmaking activities in other countries. In Britain, a small group of American ex-patriots opposed to the war in Vietnam formed the Stop it Committee. This led to the hosting of the Angry Arts Week in London, which featured postering, leafleting and theater performances opposed to the war. The success of this event led, in 1968, to the formation of the Angry Arts Film Society, which became the distributor of Newsreel’s films in Britain.
The members of the Angry Arts Film Society admired the dynamic quality of the Newsreel films, but were frustrated by their poor technical standards and, in particular, by the sometimes inaudible audio tracks of the films. Members of the group also wondered about the relevance of Newsreel’s films for British audiences. This led the Angry Arts Film Society to follow a path taken by earlier film societies, and the group shifted its focus from the distribution of films made by other filmmakers to making its own films. In 1968, the group made, in partnership with members of the Marxist Vietnam Solidarity Group, End of a Tactic (1969, n.r.t.), depicting protests in London against the war in Vietnam.

In 1970, the Angry Arts Film Society reformed as Liberation Films and continued to make films and videos into the 1980s. Tangentially, although Angry Arts Film Society was initially formed to oppose the war in Vietnam, members of the group remember that it was the exhibition of films unrelated to the war that had the most lasting impact. They recall: The Salt of the Earth’s (Herbert Bieberman 1954, 94mins) empowering depiction of women and labor organizing was received with interest and admiration by emerging second wave feminists, and San Francisco Newsreel’s film People’s Park was recognized to offer an inspiring illustration of how people can organize locally to improve their living conditions (Dickenson 1999:234).
Into the 1970s: New York Newsreel becomes Third World Newsreel

From the outset, the organizational structure of Newsreel was designed to foster shared decision-making and to place the group’s leadership was in the hands of its rank and file members. Within this model of democratic centralism the five-member organizing committee responsible for overseeing the group’s day-to-day operations were supposed to be responsive to the wishes of the group’s membership as a whole, and every activity undertaken by the group had to be approved by all members. The films made by Newsreel would not have credit rolls, since anonymity would both provide the members of the group with a measure of security should they face censure from the ‘establishment’ for their militant activities, and it would discourage members from seeking personal acclaim for their work.

However, Newsreel’s actual internal organizational and inter-personal dynamics were chaotic, and mirrored tensions rife throughout the New Left. Inside Newsreel there were ideological disagreements between proponents of Leninist, Maoist and classical Marxist theories, and between devotees of these theories and cultural radicals who eschewed dogmatic theoretical standpoints in favor of more populist forms of cultural or community based social change. Posing an even greater challenge to the smooth operation of Newsreel than these ideological differences were tensions linked to the gender and racial composition of the group, and to the role women and minorities were allowed to play in the group’s filmmaking activities. Despite Newsreel’s ambition of being ultra democratic in nature, in its first incarnation between 1967 and 1972 decision-making was largely in the hands of the
coordinating committee, which was composed entirely of European American males from privileged socio-economic backgrounds.

In addition to fostering internal tensions, Newsreel’s imbalance with regard to its gender and racial composition posed problems for the group in some of its filmmaking activities. Seeking to make a film about political organizing among black Detroit autoworkers, Newsreel partnered with The League of Revolutionary Black Workers but failed to understand the challenge posed by engaging an all white crew to depict the experiences of black workers. Although the film which emerged from these efforts, titled *Finally Got the News* (1970, 55mins), is something of a masterpiece among Newsreel films, its making was a troubled process characterized by distrust between the film crew and the black workers depicted.

Inside Newsreel, disharmony between women and men, between the privileged whites and Third World members, and between privileged white ‘haves’ and less privileged white ‘have-nots’ led to the implosion of Newsreel in the early 1970s. For a short period, two parallel Newsreel groups existed in New York, a white caucus and a Third World caucus, but this was short lived as the white caucus disintegrated and the remaining members of the Third World caucus (there were only three remaining members at the time) changed the group’s name to Third World Newsreel.

The history of Newsreel, and the struggles within it as a group, reveal much about the character of New Left radicalism during the 1960s. Newsreel’s inability to adequately address issues of gender and racial or ethnic equality led to the collapse of
the group, just as similar divisions fragmented the student’s movement and SDS from 1969 onwards. By the same token, the reinvention of Newsreel as Third World Newsreel in April 1972, with an attendant focus on making and distributing films depicting the lives of women and America’s racial minorities, illustrates the emergence of new areas of political contestation, ones that would dominate committed filmmaking during the 1970s and 1980s.

As the 1970s progressed, Third World Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel (later renamed California Newsreel) continued to make and distribute films opposing imperialism or supporting workers’ struggles and Third World independence movements, but films depicting gender or racial themes became a key presence among the films made and distributed by the two groups. In 1971, San Francisco Newsreel produced *The Woman’s Film* (40mins), a semi-observational style film in which black, Chicano and white working class women presented testimony about their personal experiences, and drew connections between these experiences and revolutionary change.

The first productions by the Third World Newsreel in New York, with Asian American filmmaker Christine Choy now playing a leading role, were a series of films confronting racism in America’s prison-industrial complex. *Teach Your Children* (1972, 35mins), made by Choy and Susan Robeson, depicts the 1971 four-day Attica prison revolt during which prisoners seized forty-two hostages, took over a large part of the prison, and presented demands for the improvement of prison conditions. Intercutting between footage filmed during the revolt and interviews
conducted with black and Latino prisoners afterwards, *Teach Your Children* situates the experience of prisoners within the broader context American racial history. As is also the case with two subsequent Third World Newsreel prison films (*In the Event Anyone Disappears* [about men’s prisons in New Jersey][1973, 50mins] and *Inside Women Inside* [depicting the experiences of women prisoners][n.d., n.r.t.]), *Teach Your Children* portrays American’s prison system as a defining site for the sustained disenfranchisement and oppression of America’s Third World peoples.

In the 1970s, both Third World Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel shifted their primary focus from the production of films to, on the one hand, training Third World peoples in the art of filmmaking so that they can author their own films, and, on the second hand, the distribution of films by Third World filmmakers. Third World Newsreel’s interest in training minority filmmakers illustrates the group’s response to the recognition that if accurate representations of the experiences of the varied constituencies film theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha terms the “women/native/other” are to appear, then women, natives and others will need to be able to make films for themselves (1991).

Third World Newsreel’s second focus from the mid 1970s onwards, on the distribution of films made by Third World filmmakers, led the group to become a leading distributor of fiction and nonfiction films made by and depicting the lives of America based and overseas Third World subjects. Following a similar trajectory, in the 1970s, California Newsreel became an influential distributor for films depicting independence struggles in southern Africa. California Newsreel’s story is particularly
instructive: following the South African Soweto uprising in 1976, demand for the group’s catalogue of films depicting African political affairs grew, multiple copies of film prints were purchased, and requests for the catalogue kept individual films in almost constant circulation. Through these distribution activities, California Newsreel became a key source for films servicing the information, education and advocacy needs of the de-centralized international anti-Apartheid movement (Downing 1984:141). Although both groups today occasionally venture into filmmaking activities of their own and serve as umbrella producers for other filmmakers, Third World Newsreel and California Newsreel today play the key educational and social movement-serving role of training filmmakers and distributing films made by, or depicting the struggles of, the colonized, formerly colonized and women/natives/others.

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i The rise of McCarthyism and the expanding anti-communist activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) created an environment inhospitable to the making and circulation of Marxism inflected labor films of the kind seen before the war. Illustrating the challenges faced by leftwing filmmakers working during this period is the case of The Salt of the Earth (1954, 94mins), Herbert Bieberman’s masterwork of European-style neo-realism in the service of American labor and racial equality agendas, which was blacklisted by the Hollywood owned theater chains.

ii Made before the war, Marc Allegret’s silent ethnographic style film Voyage to the Congo (Voyage au Congo, 1927, 100mins), in its role as companion to André Gide’s anti-colonial book of the same title, is regarded as one of the first anti-colonial films to emerge from inside a metropolitan colonial power (Ukadike 1994). Post war opposition to European colonialism sparked numerous filmmaking efforts on the part of the colonized or by European filmmakers critical of colonialism. Afrique 50 (17mins), directed by French student René Vauthier, is an early illustration of the use of film to depict rising African opposition to colonial rule. The film depicts anti-colonial uprisings in the French colonies of Côte d’Ivoire and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). It was banned in France and its colonies, and the filmmaker was temporarily forced to leave France. In Algeria, the Groupe Farid was formed in 1957 to make films in support of the Algerian war of independence, declared three years earlier by the
Front de la Libération Nationale (FLN). The group set out to collect images depicting the “fight of the people, the atrocities of colonialism, and the hardships of Algerians” (Shafik 1998:19). The masterpiece of African committed film production linked to decolonization and its immediate aftermath is Med (Mohamed Medoun) Hondo’s O Sun (O Soleil, 1969, 105mins), a “hyperbolic virtuoso display of cinematic ingenuity” depicting the experience of French colonization and its legacy from the point-of-view of the colonized (Ukadike 1994:81). Fusing documentary and fictional elements, O Sun resists conventional realist film codes to present a fragmented symbolism rich narrative exploring the psychological, cultural and historical miseries of colonization as it impacts the film’s central character, a nameless African accountant employed in France. Faced with the alienation of his life as an African living in the metropolitan center of French colonialism, this protagonist falls into near insanity before developing a political consciousness and identifying colonialism and racism as the source of his alienation. Although Hondo may not have been consciously influenced by Soviet filmmaking, O Sun’s segmented form, stylistic inventiveness, and dialectical organization, attempts “to synthesize the contradictions of neocolonial African reality in much the same way Vertov did with the Soviet Revolution” (Ukadike 1994:83). The film’s title, O Sun, is from a song Africans sang as they were transported to the West Indies as slaves (Pfaff 1986:44).

Always a forceful advocate for leftwing film production, Ivens’ involvement with the dock workers served to inspire Australian unions to form the Realist Film Association and the Waterside Workers’ Federation Film Unit. Between 1952 and 1958, these groups produced a series of agitprop documentaries on such issues as pensions, affordable housing, and working conditions on Australia’s waterfront, and in the nation’s coalmining industry (McMurchy 1994:189).

The film’s premiere in the university’s great hall was, recalls Birri: “an event unparalleled in the annals of Argentine university history. The auditorium was filled to capacity with people from the most varied social backgrounds—from august university professors to the little street kids who appear in the film… we had to screen the film three times” (Birri 1986:70).

Such as, for instance, Uruguay’s influential SODRE film festival.

In addition to providing some to the most dynamic documentary films of the era, filmmakers linked to The New Latin American Cinema generated some of the most incisive written treatises on the nature of political film. At a minimum, for all people interested in the history and practice of the committed documentary, Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino’s “Towards a Third Cinema” (1997), Julio García Espinoza’s “For an Imperfect Cinema” (1997), Fernando Birri’s “Cinema and Underdevelopment” (1997) and Thomás Gutiérrez Alea’s “The Viewer’s Dialectic” (1997), are required reading.

Getino’s filmmaking career was checkered: he worked as an underground filmmaker working to overthrow Argentina’s military dictatorship during the 1960s. Following the election of President Juan Perón in 1973, Getino was placed in charge of the nation’s film classification board and set out to end what he saw as the neo-colonial foreign domination of the Argentine film industry. Getino writes: “we wanted to contribute to the de-colonization of our country’s movie screens and thus put an end to the cultural and economic dependency of our film industry” (1986:108). However, Getino’s work for the state work was short lived and following the military coup of 1976 he was forced into overseas exile.

Ivens played an advisory role during the early years of ICAIC. He was respected in Cuba for his ability to work with the people featured in his films in a way that was neither
paternalistic nor sentimental. In November 1960, the Cuban film journal Cine Cubano stated, in response to a recent visit to Cuba by Ivens: “Wherever there’s a country struggling for its freedom, a people trying to liquidate the old structures and forge a sane and healthy future… Ivens will be present” (Quoted by Chanan 2004:196).

ix As his film LBJ (1967, 20mins) illustrates, Alvarez is also adept in using film montage to create humor. In this film, using images and film footage appropriated from Life Magazine, Playboy Magazine, western and gangster movies, and advertisements for American Winchester Rifles, Alvarez satirically portrays American president Lyndon B. Johnson as a hang-dog cowboy and an illegitimate president; one appointed to the position only because of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The film intercuts images portraying Johnson as an evil, monarchical and devilish figure with images of the political figures Alvarez sees as America’s legitimate leaders, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

x Birri intended the school to be subversive: he argues, the school promoted “artistic subversion because we questioned everything; political and professional subversion because we were training people different from those who controlled the rest of the Argentine film industry. Our subjects, our goals, our methodology—everything was different” (1986:72).

xi Birri argues: “We militant filmmakers are dependent on the ‘permissiveness’, however limited, of bourgeois democratic governments. When the dark night of fascism constricts the room for maneuver offered by more ‘liberal’ regimes, which have a stake, at least, in keeping up appearances, we all face the same range of options: to try to pursue our work in our own country, despite the heightened repression; to ‘lie low’ and wait until circumstances improve; to emigrate to another country in Latin America; or to abandon the continent. Any one of these options might be valid, depending on the particular circumstances, and they must be taken into account when judging the work of any filmmaker” (Birri 1986:75).

xii Five of the six filmmakers involved in making The Battle of Chile managed to leave Chile unobtrusively after the coup, taking with them their film footage and sound reels. Jorge Muller, a sixth cameraman was abducted by the secret police and became one of the nation’s thousands of disappeared people.


xiv The use of scavenged film footage featured prominently in de Antonio’s lengthy committed documentary making career: for the making of his earlier film Point of Order! (1963, 97mins), de Antonio secured 188-hours of footage shot by two television network cameras recording the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings in Washington. With no added narration or other forms of explanation, Point of Order! presents for the viewer an unexpurgated view of Senator Joe McCarthy’s demagogic rhetoric in action, and shows McCarthy’s determination to label all those who disagree with him as communists. Point of Order! is of interest for a number of reasons: it was the first documentary film to be composed of television footage, and it appeared to depict the Army-McCarthy hearings as they had occurred. De Antonio, however, made no effort to conceal the role editing played in the making of this, and his other, films. He agues: “Life is raw, disordered, and this was one of the jobs of making Point of Order!: to take something that had no structure” and to give it structure.xiv He adds, although some people applauded the observational quality of Point of Order!, in fact he had reordered the film’s final climactic scenes to create greater drama. De Antonio, always opposed to the idea that there was any ‘truth’ which could be revealed by observational style approach to filmmaking, argued: “The real truth is not all those discrete phenomena that lie around us in the world, but the imposition of order over them. The whole idea of cinema verité is bogus” (de Antonio 2000:91).
In 1953, working with Alan Resnais, Marker directed the film *Statues also die* (*Les statues meurent aussi*, 1953, 23mins), an early illustration of anti-colonial filmmaking inside a metropolitan colonial power. *Statues also die* juxtaposes images of works of African artworks held in the collections of European museums with archival film footage of traditional African life. A verbal narration describes the destruction of African society as African people were cut off from their heritage, saw their traditional cultures ruptured by colonialism, and were forced to survive under foreign governance. The film was banned in France for a decade, and was later only circulated in a truncated form.

In Marker’s film, Medvedkin argues, the cinema is a "great and forceful weapon," one with which "the evidence was in front of them [the workers]." In 1932, the cine train spent 294 days traveling around Russia and 91 reels of film were shot, although none of the footage is known to exist today.

Nichols argues, one of the weaknesses of Newsreel’s film work is a tendency within the collective’s films to “assume that the viewer has already evolved the faculty to conceive of an altered social fabric as something other than chaos and destruction” (1973:13).


The terms “haves” and “have-nots” were adopted internally within Newsreel to identify different constituencies within the filmmaking group (see Millner 1985).

Four days into the standoff, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the NY State Police to enter the prison in the military style assault: thirty-nine people died in the subsequent carnage, including ten of the hostages. Despite initial reports circulated in the mass media that the rebelling prisoners had murdered their hostages, it was later revealed that all the deaths resulted from the State Troopers’ gunfire.

Illustrating California Newsreel’s unique approach to film distribution is the group’s film ‘grading’ system for films in their distribution catalogue. For commercial film distributors the goal is to sell or rent as many copies of a film as possible, and films are marketed and promotion to maximize the quantity of films distributed. In contrast, out of respect for their audiences, California Newsreel operates a grading and review system (films are graded from one to five) which is designed to help potential viewers understand the strengths or weaknesses of a particular film. By disclosing the merits or weaknesses of their films in this way, California Newsreel seeks to situate the audience not simply as paying consumers, but as political actors who must be treated with “respect and concern about their reactions” (Downing 1984:144).