

The Spaces Between
Grassroots Documentary Distribution and
Exhibition as Counterpublics

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ABSTRACT

The Spaces Between Grassroots Documentary Distribution and Exhibition as Counterpublics

Ezra Winton

Documentary cinema has emerged as an important focus for research into popular culture, marginalized narratives, and democratic media. However, academic work on the genre has been narrowly focused on audience consumption habits, aesthetic or textual analyses of individual works, and cultural analyses of the intersection of documentary and mainstream commercial cinema sites and practices. This thesis is an attempt to bridge a research gap by interrogating extra-textual elements around the grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema in Canada. By linking the concepts of cultural hegemony, counterpublics and agonistic pluralism with community-oriented practices around documentary distribution and exhibition, this thesis urges a closer look at the spaces between box office numbers, high profile documentaries, and megaplexes.

Springboarding from disparate literature, the thesis builds a conceptual framework around power and community, and uses firsthand interviews with filmmakers, promoters, exhibitors and distributors to tease out the relationship between documentary cinema and counterpublics in Canada.

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CHAPTER I

HOT DOCUMENTARIES IN COOL CULTURAL SPACES¹

Tempting as it may be to single out the importance of our own times, it is imprudent to contemplate the commercial success of “documentary now” in relationship to the American political climate without looking at the political roles of “documentary then.” Unarguably, there are more overtly political documentaries being made and made available in 2007 than at any previous time. There are also more books, magazines, fiction films and television, more news coverage, websites, blogs, more of everything and everybody discussing political and social issues. Proportionally then, are documentaries more vital and more influential in our time than in others? Possibly the form has reached a peak, but documentaries must still be considered within the continuum of history.

(Betsy McLane, 2007)

We are talking, of course, about making documentaries, which has been one of the largest growth areas in media over the past five years. The new millennium has witnessed an audience craving reality everything -- television, film and alternative news. The Canadian box office for documentary films jumped more than 400 per cent from 2003 to 2004. Audiences for the annual Hot Docs festival in Toronto went from 5,000 in 1998 to more than 40,000 last year, and may reach 60,000 this year.

(Liam Lacey, *Globe and Mail*, April 2006)

The title of Liam Lacey’s celebratory article on current documentary trends reads “...and the films everyone wants to make,” (Lacey, 2006) but his *Globe and Mail* piece begs the question whether they are the films everyone wants to project. And while McLane attempts to temper the accolades bestowed on non-fiction cinema, writing such as Lacey’s dominates. His 2600-word mammoth feature story in the April 22, 2006 edition

¹ Both “hot” and “cool” are used here to reference McLuhan’s somewhat functionalist delineation of media into two categories, made in *Understanding Media*: hot signifying media that demands or elicits low participation among audiences/users, and cool signifying high participation, especially “spaces” where audio experiences occur. The reference is used to highlight the association to film as a low participation experience, or “hot” media, which this thesis ultimately argues against, provided it is experienced in “cool,” or high-participation spaces. As well, the more casual pop culture connotations to hot and cool should be obvious.

of the national newspaper occupies just the sort of space that I have come to expect of writing on the documentary genre in Canada: a feel-good romp through the success stories of box office documentary hits, peppered with “docophile” celebrities, flashy festivals, Michael Moore, and *The Corporation*; in short, a good Saturday afternoon read. Like so much of the academic and popular writings alike, his article neglects to dig deeper, beyond production news and box office numbers. There is one instance in the piece, however, where the shadowy parts of documentary cinema, the parts this thesis investigates, seem nearer to exposure. This moment comes when Lacey is speaking to Sean Farnel, the programming director of *Hot Docs*, North America’s premiere documentary film festival and industry marketplace held every year in Toronto, who says: “Documentary has become a kind of new space in the culture.” (Ibid) This thesis argues that documentary ‘spaces’ are integral to understanding cultural aspects of Canada’s publics, and those spaces are the neglected territory of grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema.

Popular rhetoric suggests there is a revolution of democratic opportunity springing forth from the wells of technology and human experience. Filmmaker, documentary advocate and writer Peter Wintonick seems to champion this position: “We are now living in the ‘hear and now’ of an evolutionary wave, the digital revolution, where everyone, literally, can become a filmmaker.” (Wintonick, 2006) But Alan Rosenthal tempers this fervour, reminding us: “Documentaries don’t just appear out of the blue. They are a media product and often take years to produce, and even then only come to birth because of the dreams, energy, sweat, doggedness and perseverance of the filmmaker. I think this is too often forgotten by critics and academics.” (Rosenthal, 2005,

p.167) Yet what brings Wintonick and Rosenthal together is what they, and the critics and the academics continue to neglect: there is more to documentary than production. While documentary *films* and *filmmakers* continue to be associated with qualities of democracy, such as “explorer, reporter, advocate, bugler, prosecutor, observer, catalyst” (Barnouw, 1993) the spaces created out of the efforts to distribute and exhibit documentaries remain largely ignored. I argue that these “in between spaces” (Bhabha, 1994) act as counterpublics and play a significant role in democracy-building and resistance to neoliberalism by connecting the discursive and physical location of distribution and exhibition with community while constructing challenges to prevailing systems of domination and power.

Distribution and exhibition as cultural and economic practices are as malleable as the grassroots spaces that are constructed for the sharing, dissemination and social experience of projecting cinema. This understudied aspect of the film industry represents the often hidden “nuts and bolts” of connecting audiences with documentary film and video. While exhibition has received perhaps more attention from cultural theorists than distribution, at least in part due to the perceived “social” aspect of viewing films in public spaces, discussion of distribution is lacking. David Sin writes:

The exhibition of film is a commonplace, shared cultural activity highly visible in every city and town in Britain, constantly feeding the popular memory. By contrast, distribution, the third part of the film supply chain, is often referred to as 'the invisible art', a process known only to those within the industry, barely written about and almost imperceptible to everyone else. Yet arguably, distribution is the most important part of the film industry, where completed films are brought to life and connected with an audience. (Sin, Screenonline)

He continues with the standard description of film products moving through the marketplace, emphasizing the difference between vertical integration (between

production, exhibition and distribution) in the “Hollywood” system, and the “collaborative” process he sees occurring in the independent sector. One thing is certain: distribution and exhibition are collapsing into each other, whether it is facilitated (or forced) by multinationals vertically integrating their media systems, technological advances such as direct web-broadcast applications and platforms (such as Miro), or grassroots organizers procuring films, showing them in public spaces, and sharing the work within networks. Later in this thesis, a filmmaker and activist describes moving around the USA and Canada with canisters of film in order to show “community” screenings. Whether it is digits, discs or tape, the movement and sharing of cinema, including documentary, is revealed in the spaces explored in the following pages.

The recent ascension of documentary films into the popular psyche of the West as well as into global commercial markets is causing increased attention from the popular press and academics from disciplines as disparate as cinema studies and macroeconomics, (with an emergent coterie of legal-minded writers concerned with “risk” and “security” around digital considerations). Rare exceptions to the fiction-dominated box office rulebook are continuously trotted out, put on display and celebrated as proof of the genre’s movement toward the mainstream. Films like *Bowling for Columbine* (2004), *March of the Penguins* (2005), *Touching the Void* (2004), and more recently, *Sicko* (2007) are exemplified as the champion invaders into (fiction) fortress Hollywood. However, one need only examine a top-grossing documentaries list for a minute to discover that by sixth place the film hails from 1991, perhaps not a strong endorsement for evidence of a plethora of documentary box office hits in the last decade.

Complimenting the celebration of *exceptions* at the box office there exist numerous studies looking at the production and/or artistic/aesthetic aspects of the genre, amounting to a significant gap in the research concerning distribution and exhibition, the area of focus of this inquiry. By closing this gap in our understanding of the socio-political, economic and cultural significance of diverse documentary distribution/exhibition practices, this thesis aims to develop not only a comprehension of ‘alternative’ and ‘grassroots’ spaces and how they are constructed as interlocutors in the ‘democracy project,’ but also to contribute research that connects disparate theories around hegemony and democracy with documentary.

Democracy itself is a hotly contested term, commonly associated with “rights and equality” and “collective decision-making processes” (Beetham, 2005, p.2). I will avoid wading into the political science and philosophy debates, and instead elicit a communication scholar’s problematic description: “Democracy is a particular manner of constituting the various practices of judgment and action that together make up politics.” (Barney, 2005, p. 8) What is sticky in Barney’s equation is the word *particular*, but it is also where he has left room to maneuver, making this ‘definition’ an apt springboard for a discussion of democratic principles and practices as they relate to documentary. The *particular manner* or vision/theory of democracy that I am interested in is what Chantal Mouffe calls “deliberative democracy” or “agonistic pluralism,” and entails positivist recognition of deep-seated differences between groups in society. (Mouffe, 2005, p.12) Mouffe believes that traditional liberal democratic theory has led society down a delusional path of false-reconciliation between antagonistic factions, and in turn, posits

that these differences need to be acknowledged, made distinct, and championed with a pluralistic approach. Mouffe summarizes this position:

Only by acknowledging ‘the political’ in its antagonistic dimension can we pose the central question for democratic politics. This question, pace liberal theorists, is not how to reach a ‘rational’, i.e. a fully inclusive, consensus, without any exclusion. Despite what many liberals want us to believe, the specificity of democratic politics is not the overcoming of the we/they opposition but the different way in which it is established. What democracy requires is drawing the we/they distinction in a way that is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy. (2005, p.14)

Central to Mouffe’s ‘democratic project’ are the concepts of antagonism, *the political*, and hegemony. These ideas also provide signposts for the theoretical framework of my discussion connecting community-oriented documentary distribution and exhibition practices with democratic principles, social movements and social research in Canada, and will be teased out in later pages, concentrated in Chapter II, where they will be given the conversation space that they require. While documentary content itself is often cited as a cultural product that embodies elements of these concepts, such as the film *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (2000, Friedberg and Rowley, directors) research is lacking that connects this conceptual framework with non-production or non-aesthetic elements of the genre; in other words, *supra-textual* analysis.

Similar to experimental and independent films, documentaries receive little of the production funding pie in Canada compared with fiction features, and thus continue to face monetary marginalization at all levels. (*Profile 2007*, 2007) Unlike the case with fiction features, documentary filmmakers are usually unable to secure funding *before* the film is finished, not to mention that this kind of “bankrolling” in the fiction market also comes with distribution deals, ensuring the final (fiction) work makes it onto the screen

somewhere. Documentaries make up a small fraction of screen space in both the US and Canada, a hurdle at least partly stemming from this built-in bias for fiction over non-fiction within the industry and among lenders and funders.² This economic challenge, combined with a lack of commercial faith in the ability of documentary ‘products’ to compete at cinema houses (mostly articulated by industry elite), have contributed to the ‘underdog’ status of documentary film and video relative to the commercial market of distribution and exhibition in Canada, and has engendered a belief that the genre belongs almost exclusively on television. By understanding the relational positioning of documentary film and video as a cultural experience and as cultural texts within a larger increasingly privatized and commercialized public sphere (McChesney, 1999) an investigation into the role of alternative, independent, or grassroots practices as sites and currents of opposition, contention and community-building will be possible. Documentary, as a traditionally marginalized media practice surviving alongside a billions-of-dollars fiction cinema industry, creates what Clemencies Rodriguez refers to as “fissures in the mediascape,” where democratic spaces open up within a tightly controlled landscape dominated by a handful of global entertainment players and new possibilities emerge for publics or citizenry. (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 1)

By discussing the social consensus or hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) elements of the commercial film industry, reviewing the history of film policy, and interrogating sites of alternative community-oriented practices around documentary distribution/exhibition in

² It wasn’t until 2007, and after decades of pressure from groups like the Documentary Organization of Canada, that Telefilm began *discussing the possibility* of documentary features being included for speculative funding within the Feature Film Fund envelope. At one time documentaries were considered to only have no commercial exhibition potential and only television broadcast possibilities, and were therefore kept at the “tv hour” length. Of course, filmmakers have over the years challenged this restrictive pre-formatting of the genre and now argue such state funding regulations are antiquated and non-sensical.

Canada, I endeavour to excavate documentary practices from the larger cinema space and argue that the health/vitality/presence of this genre in alternative spaces acts as a kind of litmus test for the larger democratic project. While much of the contemporary academic and journalistic work on documentary cinema's 'rise' has focused on the genre's ascension within the framework of the global entertainment commercial system, I am interested in documentary practices – particularly around distribution and exhibition – that continue to open up spaces outside of commercial structures, a matrix that has spawned the megaplex and pay-per-view cinema, among other commercially-oriented articulations. (Slack, 1996) These 'other spaces' of cultural consumption, creation, and experience are important *fissures* to examine in order to understand the heterogeneous activities of media dissemination, communication, resistance and community-building.

Rodriguez has named media produced in these kinds of spaces "citizens media," (2001) and while I have chosen to call the practices around my research site *independent*, *alternative* and *grassroots*, the words all connect in solidarity with a process and 'movement' that Rodriguez describes in only slightly different language:

Throughout the world, citizens of all ethnic groups, ages, genders, and social classes are making an effort to open a media space where they can voice their concerns, their dilemmas, and their dreams for the future. As diverse as the groups from where it originates, this media space, like a colorful quilt, takes a myriad of different shapes and eclectic forms. (2001, p. 27)

Mapping the practices and strategies of marginalized media provides a more coherent, complete description of the mediascapes (Attallah and Shade, 2006) (Western) society engages with on a daily basis. Concerning cinema, the picture that continues to be academically constructed (as well as dismantled) predominantly reveals aspects of the commercial industry. By instead forwarding documentary practices, we are led into the

realm of the marginalized, and further focusing on the distribution/exhibition practices that operate outside the mainstream enables the description of the edges of a larger, more organic but less understood picture of community-oriented media in particular and democracy in general.

The Community/Commercial Continuum

Some pages into the first chapter of Charles Acland's *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes and Global Culture* is a suggested Foucauldian foundation for cultural analyses. Acland writes: "In all cultural analysis we might pose the question: What is the relationship between the emergent and the residual and between the appearance of novelty and of repetition?" (2003, p.17) Acland then discusses a "Gramscian approach to cultural critique" in order to "produce a historical portrait of the dynamic relations between dominant and subordinate forms and practices" (Ibid) so that a path of action may be well-informed (radical intervention, parallel alternatives, and evolutionary reformation are exemplified). Acland is mainly concerned with dynamic emergent and residual qualities of global cinema's increasingly dominant space of exhibition and consumption – the megaplex. His excellent analysis of the cultural and economic implications of commercial theatres and theatergoing provides the type of expansive cultural critique that has yet to be written for distribution/exhibition spaces operating largely outside of the commercial mainstream, sites of participation and consumption I describe as *community-oriented spaces*. In a research statement that would only need the words "motion picture theatre" changed to "community-oriented alternative practices" to effectively describe my own thesis research focus, Acland declares:

Indeed, it is a chief contention of this book that an essential location at which discourses of global audiences are being worked out and applied – one that has been overlooked by the swelling industry of scholarly work on global culture – is the motion picture theatre. (Ibid)

While Acland has identified a scholarly gap in work looking at one aspect of commercial-oriented cinema practices, his work remains professionally engaged and wholly concerned with the commercial industry and not grassroots-fuelled democracy.

Linking democracy with documentary is not a new idea, but forwarding documentary distribution/exhibition spaces and practices as a research focus is a fresh perspective that only a handful of academics have taken to task recently. Among the few is Julia Knight, who is currently the head researcher of an enormous project titled “Independent Film and Video Distribution in the UK During the 1980s and 1990s.” She writes:

Indeed, film and video distribution generally is a neglected field of academic study, and with regard to independent film and video distribution specifically it has produced only a handful of articles: there has been no indepth study of distribution practices across the sector. (2007, project website)

While Knight’s research is mostly concerned with UK practices, the above contention is applicable to Canada as well, where research tends to follow international trends: inquiries have been concerned primarily with the production end of documentary practices, and when distribution/exhibition has been forwarded, the focus has been on the American studio system and Hollywood’s vertical integration with Canada’s commercial film industry. When documentaries have been specifically targeted for academic discussion, an emphasis on populism, commercial success, and content or textual analysis have continued to dominate. (Rosenthal and Corner, 2005; Ellis and McLane, 2005) In

short, there is a clear and urgent need for sustained research into documentary distribution and exhibition practices outside of the commercial market.

My research interests lie with the alternative spaces outside of commercial spaces and in order to discuss and interrogate them, certain language parameters must be established. At the heart of this inquiry is a discussion that addresses the residue of an ill-conceived dichotomy between oft-labeled ‘alternative media’ and ‘mainstream media.’ I would like to put forward a line of thinking for disentanglement whereby this perceived binary is re-conceived as a continuum with points of reference differentiated by disparate processes, goals and results. Media practices that are primarily concerned with the commercial – that is to say, with elements associated with increasing profit margins by delivering audiences to advertisers, distribution outlets, exhibition spaces and ancillary markets – I am describing as *commercially-oriented* practices and spaces. The commercial signifier is similar to the cultural moniker ‘mainstream’, but implies a fundamental ideological difference with regard to economic orientation, rather than simply delineating an accepted (and even celebrated) cultural dominance that the word ‘mainstream’ can narrowly denote.

Community-oriented media practices are concerned with engendering social participation, facilitating and/or producing the stories of marginalized and oppressed populations, and creating both discursive and physical spaces where such ‘counternarratives’ (Bhabha, 1994) can be shared and debated in an accessible, inclusive and responsive environment. Through activities carried out in these spaces outside of commercial/mainstream spaces, counterpublics are formed that ultimately contribute to

the building and boosting of democracies by reclaiming space and shifting power to participants and citizens formerly regarded as (passive) audiences and consumers.

In his discussion of public access television, Higgins points to the differences between community media and commercial media. He writes:

Given its foundation as an alternative to commercial, corporate-dominated electronic media, the philosophical orientation of public access differs sharply from that of mainstream commercial television. The access movement emphasizes notions of the public interest and the public sphere over profits, and public access facilities focus more on providing an outlet for access to and the expression of marginalized ideas than on audience size. (1999, p.626)

Higgins continues to describe such community-oriented media as “process-based phenomena” that “empower” (Ibid) participants engaged with such initiatives. The notion of empowerment is key to this study as well, as empowerment suggests collective challenges to power systems that as hegemonies, reconstitute domination through ideology whereby subordination is perpetuated by the consent of those dominated. (Gramsci, 1971) Higgins describes the first level of empowerment to be one of “self-awareness” and awareness of others in society, and that the “highest level of empowerment is determined to be attempts to change power relationships on the societal level...” (Higgins, 1999, p.630) Thus, community-oriented media practices empower communities by opening up access, engendering participation beyond consumption, constructing individual and collective identities, and challenging power inequality. By contrast, commercial media practices are predominantly concerned with production aesthetics, profit margins and audience sizes (Ibid).

While there are clear differences between these two ‘areas’ of media practices, analyzing them as separated elements in a confrontational dichotomy limits the

discussion and treats them as unnaturally neat, compartmentalized packages of practice. In fact, the lines are fluid and in constant flux and represent more of a continuum of process and practice than they do a binary. To use two simple examples of the fluidity of the margins around cinema practices, many documentary filmmakers produce, distribute and exhibit films independently in ‘alternative’ spaces but wish for commercial success with ‘mainstream’ audiences (as is discussed with Mark Achbar and his film, *The Corporation*, in Chapter IV); as well, some commercial entities intentionally target ‘political activists’ with alternative programming of social justice documentaries (witness the huge box office success of the slide show-cum-film *An Inconvenient Truth*). At the extreme ends of the continuum, before there is total overlap, there are media practices nearly exclusively concerned with commerce/profit and those nearly exclusively concerned with community/people. This ‘fuzzy space’ will be problematized further in Chapter III of this thesis, where I discuss the main site for this research – one that embodies characteristics of both ‘territories’ mentioned above and therefore constitutes the boundary blurring found in this media distribution/exhibition continuum. At the heart of this discussion of community and commercial media practices is an engagement with the dominant globally stretched ideology of neoliberalism. Communities able to articulate their own identities in discursive and physical spaces in the face of corporate media flows are essentially engaged in countering neoliberal hegemony. Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a “programme for destroying collective structures” (1998b) so that market forces can continue to shape reality for society. As corporations continue to wield enormous power in this “programme,” through among other manifestations, global media

networks, pockets of resistance and counter-hegemonies take shape as community-oriented media spaces. Such are those of grassroots distribution and exhibition.

The ways in which media are shared and experienced are as equally important as the content itself. Communications scholar Marshall McLuhan famously captured this emphasis on delivery in a popularized adage when he wrote, “The medium is the message.” (McLuhan, 1964) Especially prolific have been the political economy studies of a Hollywood-dominated global entertainment system, where scholars track products from script inception within the film furnaces of Los Angeles to the black-market DVDs being sold under canopies on the streets of Bangkok. Intrepid investigators have traced the movements of tape, celluloid, disc and digits as they travel the globe in search of primary, secondary and ancillary markets. Toby Miller has identified this phenom as “Global Hollywood,” and devoted two volumes to the discussion of a hegemonic system that “is simultaneously embraced and rejected by world publics.” (Miller, 2005, p.2)

Even localized studies of national cinemas – such as Eirini Sifaki’s 2003 study of the declining outdoor cinema experience in Greece – tend to emphasize a domination by Hollywood where distribution and exhibition are discussed in terms of domestic market subordination and the resulting “occupation” by megaplexes exhibiting American product. (2003, pp. 243-257) Similarly, Kerr and Flynn’s paper on the movie and games industries in Ireland highlights global media institutions that are becoming “more concentrated over time and developing into oligopolies” such that “Irish producers are unable to break into a distribution system which remains dominated by global-scale players.” (Kerr and Flynn, 2003, pp. 3 and 19) In the Irish study, the researchers connect with this inquiry by discussing “counter movements to maintain diversity of media

content” (Ibid, p.3) reminiscent of counterpublics. Indeed, facets of distribution/exhibition within the commercial film and video market have been examined profoundly and have produced ample criticisms, but little of this expertise has been applied to documentary practices, let alone alternative or independent distribution/exhibition practices in the documentary genre. In short, there is a real need for research in this area to move beyond commerce, the commercial, and the narrow framing of cinema ‘products.’ This investigation is a beginning, an uncovering of cultural locations.

New Cartographies: Locating Grassroots Documentary Practices, Democracies and Social Movements

Any journey requires directions at some point, and to begin ‘discovering’ these cultural locations Patricia Zimmermann’s linkage between democracy and documentary offers some bearing:

Democracy is no longer a given, it is an interrogation. There is not one democracy, but multiple democracies; there is not one form of documentary, but multiple documentary practices. Coupling these new documentaries with a notion of democracies requires a new cartography, one that is almost three-dimensional – like a hologram – composed of mobile, endlessly morphing layers of nation, borders, spaces, technologies, access, identities, transnationals, and pirates, where each layer is not parallel to any other, but all the layers are always in fact relationships of varying impact and influence. (Zimmermann, 2000, p.24)

In her introduction to *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, Zimmermann outlines the multifaceted current new world order as a layered network of “commerce, politics, and aesthetics” (Ibid, p.26) that acts as a homogenizing force where multinational corporations and governments continue to co-curate a universal exhibition of mediated commercial culture increasingly devoid of “differences, controversies, [and]

passions.” (Ibid, p.27) Zimmermann spends several pages of the book highlighting the many attacks on the arts that, combined with a neoliberal economic philosophy that has privatization at its core, are tearing at a public fabric. (Zimmermann, 2000, p. xvii) She writes that “anything public...is auctioned off like suburban real estate to private enterprise. The collective and the public have shrunk into the individual and the private.” (Ibid) To combat this profit-based force of socio-political and economic consolidation, Zimmermann argues for increased support for the media arts, especially independent political documentaries:

Because they are associated with disruptive, polemical ideas rather than more neutral affirmations of higher aesthetic and less localized sensibilities, media arts, especially documentary, engage a political volatility and national instability of public space that conservatives want to defuse and derail. (Zimmermann, 2000, p.35)

This “new cartography” is the second discursive space that my thesis interrogates (the first being Canadian film industry/policy and the counter-position of documentary cinema practices). Together, the mapping out of grassroots documentary distribution/exhibition practices and the links to the larger area of social movements around public space, democratic media and anti-neoliberalism constitute an effort to oppose the hegemony of neoliberal economic and cultural policies, with a focus on documentary cinema.

Pierre Bourdieu writes that neoliberalism has established itself as a dominant discourse through sustained intervention by media-makers and intellectuals as a “whole labour of symbolic inculcation...[that puts forward] presuppositions of...maximum growth, competitiveness and productivity” (1998, p. 29,30) that ultimately leads to privatization, commercialization and consolidation of the media into the hands of a few elites. In concert with Bourdieu’s assertion is an active strain of research and writing that

examines and exposes these phenomena. (Bagdikian, 1987, p. xvi; McChesney, 1999b, 1999a; Hackett, 2000; Thussu, 2000, p.5; Langlois and Dubois, 2005, p.10; McPhail, 2006, p.59) Bourdieu, like Mouffe, Rodriguez and others, feels that researchers have a role to play in resisting neoliberalism in all its forms against all its fronts. He writes:

Against this *doxa*, one has to try to defend oneself, I believe, by analyzing it and trying to understand the mechanisms through which it is produced and imposed. But that is not enough, although it is important, and there are a certain number of empirical observations that can be brought forward to counter it. (1998, p. 31)

Across the Atlantic from France, the Canadian state continues to embrace neoliberal economic models to shape policy (Carroll and Shaw, 2001) so rigorously it has the attention of British scholars, like Colin Leys, who tacitly warns other states not to follow the Canadian example: “How far other states will be induced to surrender their sovereignty to Transnational Corporations in as wholesale and humiliating a way as Canada and Mexico have done under NAFTA remains to be seen.” (Leys, 2001, p.21) To understand the forces of such an ubiquitous, hegemonic ideology, and how to defend against, it is also important to analyze and investigate the very defensive measures exacted, such are often the spaces of grassroots documentary distribution and exhibition.

A central argument of this thesis is that it is equally relevant for academics to focus research efforts on grassroots/alternative media practices as it is to interrogate commercial or ‘mainstream’ practices. Research contributions that examine grassroots/alternative media practices have the great opportunity to contribute not only to the academy, but also to the various ‘social movements’ the studies seek to understand and interrogate. Contemporary scholars like Clemencia Rodriguez, Chantal Mouffe, Dorothy Kidd, and the contributing writers to *Sociology for Changing the World* have

called this “activist research” and at times, “participatory research.” (Frampton, Kinsman, Thompson and Tilleczek, 2006, and Rodriguez, 2001, respectively) Similarly, this inquiry is concerned with contributing to both the amelioration of independent documentary communities and to the democracy project by mapping grassroots practices that create spaces conducive to access and inclusiveness, participation, and responsiveness. (Barney, 2005, p.10) Rodriguez describes this sort of work as “...a theoretical analysis that attempts to capture the essence of alternative media and/or to explain the importance of these media as processes of communication and democracy.” (2001, p.11) What makes this kind of analysis more radical than perhaps a standard, Marxist political economy investigation of media practices is that I position myself, reflexively, at various points throughout the text. In the following chapter (Chapter II) I provide a thorough examination of some of these intersecting lines of thinking with a theoretical framework and literature review.

In one section of the book *Sociology for Changing the World* entitled *Research as Disruption*, the editors celebrate a strategy in academic research for positioning the self within the area of research. They write: “...when we’re doing activist research one should ‘Start where you’re at. Map your way outward. Watch the interconnections proliferate.’” (G. Smith quoted in Frampton et al., 2006, p.97) The writers then use metaphor to describe the advantages of being inside the belly of the beast and seeing “their squishy insides, their ineptitudes and the causes of their indigestion.” (Frampton et al., Ibid) The flamboyant language is meant to inspire academics to position themselves in their work, should they occupy a position, which I indeed do, informed in part from

some years working as an activist and advocate in documentary distribution and exhibition.

In 2001 I began a small, innocuous political film series at Langara College in Vancouver, British Columbia, called *Cinema Politica*. The idea to hold regular free campus screenings of politically charged (that is to say, politically biased) films and videos was born out of a frustration around access: I knew about many political films and videos but I could not find them anywhere to watch. By 2005 this singular film series had turned into a network of 24 locations across Canada (most of which are located on university campuses, from Vancouver to Saskatoon to Charlottetown), two in Europe and two in the USA. Each 'local' is semi-autonomous and fashions their own programming, albeit from a centralized programming pool that is curated by myself, operating out of Montreal. As the network continues to grow through grassroots promotion and word-of-mouth, it is manifesting into a community-oriented 'alternative' distribution and exhibition circuitry operating outside the commercial 'mainstream.'

My experience with organizing and curating Cinema Politica has inspired this thesis and provided me with opportunities to gain "insider's insight" to grassroots distribution and exhibition practices as well as the privilege of access to some of Canada's most important and celebrated individuals, like Mark Achbar, director of *The Corporation*. It has also provided a comparison point for my own investigation into Film Circuit - a national program for bringing films that play in urban centre commercial cinemas to the screens of small town Canada - which follows later in Chapter IV. In that chapter, I position myself through this work, within my field of inquiry, and elaborate on my own experiences as they relate to methodology.

There is a persistent idea that is manifest in Canadian journalism, academic texts and popular literature that is so ubiquitous it edges close to becoming a great unexamined and unchallenged truth. From well-known Canadian filmmakers to cultural bureaucrats, over the past several decades the mantra has stayed relatively unchanged: Canadians do not make films that Canadians want to see, let alone pay money to see. This argument is based on several interwoven threads of thinking that, embroidered together, comprise the cultural and economic articulation of the feature film industry (or lack of) North of Hollywood. These manifestations all tend toward pointing to production as a source for all the ills of the industry, and have been communicated with such clarity and conviction by artists, academics and policymakers, that indeed a hegemonic discursive space has been built around the disentangling of the Canadian feature film debacle. This argumentation has obfuscated attempts to locate the "problems" of a Canadian feature film market outside of the political economy and content analysis of production, and has made difficult the project of forwarding distribution and exhibition as problem area loci in this important discussion.

In 2006 Canadians went to the cinema 130 million times, (*Profile 2007*, 2007) nearly as often as their American counterparts to the South, and that's not where the similarity ends. Of all the films Canadians were watching at movie theatres in 2006, around 95 percent were non-Canadian works, mostly originating from the Hollywood studio system, leaving just under four percent of screen space to be occupied by Canadian content (it would be closer to two percent, were it not for Quebec's cinema inflating the numbers). Less than two percent were documentaries. In that same year however, Canadian publics were engaged at sites not registered in these statistics – the spaces of

grassroots distribution and exhibition found across the country, if one looks hard enough. This thesis is an attempt to open up those spaces and tease out the cultural significance to hegemony, democracy, and community.

Chapter II is a survey of literature that examines hegemony, democracy, community media and documentary. Building from work that is inspired by Gramsci's investigation into cultural hegemony and power structures, the chapter moves into a discussion of counter-hegemony and how counterpublics are constructed and articulated in the realm of grassroots distribution/exhibition practices. How these spaces relate to democracy is fleshed out through an investigation into Chantal Mouffe's work on agonistic pluralism, ending with Patricia Zimmermann and others' research into documentary cinema as a form of democratic intervention. Chapter III constitutes an abbreviated history of film policy and discursive spaces around distribution and exhibition in Canada. A trajectory of elements of Canadian film industry is mapped, with an emphasis on further explorations into documentary distribution and exhibition spaces, concluding with a look at the NFB project, *Challenge for Change* as a historical example of the theory discussed in Chapter II. Chapter IV connects fieldwork with the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter II. Beginning with positioning myself within my area of research, the chapter moves through interviews with filmmakers, promoters, exhibitors and distributors. Finally, Chapter V concludes by connecting findings with theory.

Methodology

My primary research consists of a series of interviews with individuals considered stakeholders in the area of grassroots documentary distribution and exhibition. They are

agents of huge successes, whether their projects have been films, film distribution, or film exhibition. Some have been celebrated as innovative, popular agents of change, while others remain under-appreciated but integral to the areas I investigate. In choosing informants, I have benefited from access, and exploited my own relationships in the field of documentary film to procure interviews with some high profile agents operating in Canada. That said, the sample group of informants are incredibly articulate, informed and experienced agents in their respective areas. They are imbued with great acclaim, enormous responsibilities, and insider's knowledge to aspects of the research that is difficult to find - if at all - within the existing research body.

I assembled three sets of questions that were slightly changed to accommodate different individuals. The sets are formed out of the following three categories, and were applied to each individual depending on his or her status and profession: independent filmmaker, independent promoter and/or distributor, and exhibitor. In total, six interviews were conducted in Canada over the last year with the following individuals: Mark Achbar (filmmaker – *The Corporation*), Katherine Dodds (promoter, marketer – Good Company Communications & Hello Cool World), Cameron Haynes (promoter, distributor, exhibitor – Film Circuit), David LeRoy (Manager and exhibitor – AMC 8 Montreal), Mike Mitchell (filmmaker – *You are on Indian Land*) and Kirwan Cox (filmmaker, researcher, educator). Each informant was given a slightly adjusted set of questions and asked to provide answers to the best of their ability in person, over the phone and by email, depending on the situation.

This cross-sampling of *on-the-ground* experts provides, I believe, a respectable sampling of the attitudes, assumptions, opinions and passions of agents operating in both

the discursive and physical multiplicity of spaces that make up documentary cinema distribution and exhibition in Canada. Considering the overarching concern of this thesis is to disentangle these spaces to address the *problem of diversity* in Canada's distribution channels and exhibition sites, documentary was not always the focal point. In certain instances, as with LeRoy, general questions around programming and the power relations associated with curatorial decision-making trumped a concentrated dialogue on documentary cinema. Regrettably, attempts to meet with cultural policy-makers met with continuous bureaucratic challenges that ultimately prevented the inclusion of an interview from that perspective. However, some compensation is made considering the many government documents cited in this chapter and elsewhere, that can be viewed as moments of communication between the state and stakeholders, and the public to some degree.

My research was restricted to these two areas of existing literature and primary field work by way of interviews in response to the nature of the inquiry at hand. This is not a pure political economy analysis nor solely a cultural critique, but rather an examination of a well-documented problem and an attempt to provide paths for new ways of understanding the 'problem' of Canada's cinema(s) and the alternative ways responses are being articulated. By building from the literature, examining data found in reports, and interviewing agents active in the spaces I interrogate, I am attempting an exposition of a way of seeing the concerns and responses to the problem of cinema diversity in Canada – specifically concerning documentary and distribution/exhibition.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUAL SPACES FOR RESEARCH INTO DOCUMENTARY PLACES

In two realms of cultural output Canada has been unsurpassed as a producer: documentary film and cultural policy (not to mention policy analysis).

(Zoë Druick, 2007, p.3)

This is an age when the documentary form serves as the template for any number of narrative films, television shows, and entertainment products in the multi-channel universe. Fiction filmmakers lend artistic credibility to their work by boasting that it was shot in the cinema vérité style and the hippest Hollywood directors gain credo by telling Vanity Fair that they're currently working on a documentary. It's easy to forget that there was a time twenty years ago when documentaries were the redheaded stepchild of the North American film industry.

(Andrew McIntosh, 2003, p.11)

While documentary may no longer be the outcast sibling of the film family in Canada and the USA, distribution and exhibition of documentary remains a twice-removed cousin rarely visited let alone celebrated in the way such popular writing on the genre has it, such as McIntosh's piece in the 20th anniversary special pullout section of *POV Magazine* (a Canadian publication dedicated to non-fiction, independent film and filmmakers). This chapter visits that neglected offspring, and presents various ways of imagining and theorizing documentary distribution and exhibition practices through the work of disparate writers from diverging backgrounds and academic fields. Brought together, their work presents both problems and paths to complicating and understanding the extra-productive elements (or supra-textual) of a cultural phenomenon that has received diverse

attention in some areas, such as textual/aesthetic analysis, and all-too-little in others, such as d/e³ spaces.

It is certainly true that documentary is not without its share of attention (government, trade, press, popular and academic alike), and while there are many texts that specifically look at documentary as a genre, they are not examined here except to serve as examples of works that I argue neglect the critical area of distribution and exhibition. Even the newest, most expansive and diverse volumes on documentary continue to leave d/e spaces and practices on the cutting room floor. For example, *New Challenges for Documentary, 2nd Edition*, published less than two years ago, identifies distribution as one of five new “aspects of change,” but devotes one page out of 507 to the area and even then, it is couched in the familiar economic rubric of “Funding, Markets and Distribution,” (Rosenthal and Corner, eds., 2005, p.3) This highlights the secondary focus of this chapter – theoretical approaches to d/e that are not concerned exclusively with pecuniary aspects of documentary cinema. Indeed, this chapter is meant to map out movement *away* from such territories, charting new pathways into the less familiar cultural topographies of literature that complicate the role of documentary cinema, especially d/e spaces and practices, as well as the genre’s relationship(s) with democratic ideals, goals and practices.

The editors of the book mentioned above are correct when they state that there has been “real development since the 1980s” (Ibid, p.2) in academic studies of the documentary genre. As well, it is difficult to argue against their assertion that “a new space has been created for discussion both within film studies, where there has been a

³ d/e will appear throughout the following chapters as an abbreviation for distribution/exhibition.

move outwards from the primary concern of aesthetics of fictional cinema, and also within media studies, where documentary television has become the subject of sociological as well as critical analysis.” (Ibid) However, despite this new space for documentary discussion that they rightfully identify as witnessed by the numerous books, journals, articles and conferences that now proliferate, there are spaces that remain neglected by the academy and its various articulations of knowledge production and transfer. Grassroots d/e spaces and practices deserve academic inclusion in the documentary discussion, and to do so, other, less-obvious areas need to be explored. The authors that follow examine a diverse range of areas including hegemony, counterpublics, democratic theory and alternative media. Their interrogations, isolated, may seem unconcerned with documentary d/e issues, but together the ideas they wrestle with and the authors’ approaches to divergent academic areas form the edges of the map I use to discuss documentary d/e spaces and practices as important sites in the larger territory of academic studies into documentary and (media) democracy.

A central starting point to provide a kind of ‘theoretical net’ to gather the various formations is Raymond Williams’s concept of “structure of feeling,” where residual effects of cultural activities are shaped into new cultural forms that make sense of a material world (Williams, 1977). There is not one structure of feeling to be concerned with regarding this investigation into grassroots documentary distribution and exhibition practices in Canada, but several. It is the tools that Williams’s conceptual framework of structure of feeling brings to developing a coherent methodology that I engage with.

Williams’s critique of individual experience seeks to move away from analysis and discussion that relies on the reification of culture into commodities and numbers. He

writes: “The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products.” (Williams, 1977, p.128) Much of the discourse that looks at documentary cinema is not concerned with the “experience” of distributing or exhibiting docs, but rather the interplay between the box office (or market), audience (or marketing), and the ‘finished product’ of the actual film. Williams shares a concern for cultural hegemony, posed against reductionism, and his cultural hypothesis of a “structure of feeling” is a theoretical maneuver that opens up practices and spaces (or experiences) such as those around documentary d/e, to complicate them as processes and not mere products or points in a historical timeline.

By theorizing cultural practices as non-static, complex articulations of social experience, pathways to understanding alternative or grassroots spaces open, as well as ways of seeing these formations as socially significant sites of resistance and community. These cultural “relations” that have been neglected from the discussions on documentary - once considered under Williams’s terms - become as important to the social project of democracy and culture as textual analysis has in other studies. Grassroots spaces and practices around the dissemination and exposition of documentary cinema are part of various structures of feelings that the discursive formations visited in this chapter have revealed as counterpublics, alternative media spaces, cultural interventions and more. Williams summarizes the importance of situating cultural practices as structures of feelings:

...as a matter of cultural theory this is a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of

feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced.
(Ibid, p.133)

What follows is an attempt to use various theoretical approaches to social experience in order to situate, but not alienate, documentary d/e experiences as articulations of a larger social experience around democracy, documentary cinema and media in general.

(Cultural) Hegemony and Market Choice

One theory that informs so much of cultural analysis and the rest of the journey this thesis takes is the theory of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci's writings on the complexities of power and influence have influenced cultural and communication studies pursuits, from structural analyses of media ownership and control to localized instances of (mis)representation in media. While some scholars find the descriptor, "cultural," redundant, it is used sometimes in the context of the particular author being discussed. That said, Gramsci's hegemony is always cultural, just as Williams reminds us experience is always social. Much of the discourse around hegemony and media (and cinema in particular) focuses on media ownership and the USA, such as the following rhetorical question: "What happened to make the US culturally hegemonic?" (Miller, et al., 2005, p.65) Hegemony is not just about American cultural ownership and control, but is a complicated concept that demands fleshing out.

To understand hegemony, I turn to Antonio Gramsci and the scholars who have extracted and unraveled important concepts and threads from his body of circumstantially fragmented writing. While the Italian's writings were known in some socialist circles in North America by the 1960s (Khoury, 2007, p.55), it was in the 1980s that the academic practice of sifting through Gramsci for constructing contemporary argumentation was at

its heyday⁴. Stuart Hall, Richard Peet, and T.J. Lears are scholars born out of this effort, and while their approaches and disciplines vary, they are harnessed here for their originality, voracity and clarity. Hall takes Gramsci's notion of hegemony and disentangles it from historically bound theorizing, only to leverage it into a discussion of domination and race with its own historical confines. While the end focal points are somewhat different from my concern with cinema, Hall's essay "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" on hegemony and race brings great insight into the interplay between production, culture, domination and ideology. Likewise, T. J. Jackson Lears excavates Gramscian spaces for an understanding on cultural hegemony, domination, subordination, consent, ideology and even distribution – edging close to the spatial focus of my thesis – grassroots distribution practices in the arena of cultural production, circulation and consumption/absorption of cultural products. More recently, Richard Peet has exploited the ideas of hegemony and historical bloc to form an argument around South Africa's Africa National Congress (ANC) and what he refers to as a "geography of hegemony." (Peet, 2002, p. 54)

Besides renovating Marxism, Gramsci's central concepts around power, domination and consent reinvigorate interrogations of politics, culture and power, especially under advanced capitalism where these three 'forces' have become more intertwined, discussed, celebrated, and globalized than in previous economic eras (or current alternative economic regimes). Gramsci's concern with totalitarianism and the authoritarian politics that his country experienced, ultimately lead the imprisoned dissident to lengthy examinations of production, culture and 'consent of the many at the

⁴ Amongst Anglophone academics, as the translated texts became more readily available.

hands of the few', and how this 'set' interplays with the previous 'set' to constitute historically specific moments of a process he would call 'hegemony.' His brilliant, if chaotic, intellectual investigations continue to inform scholars from disparate disciplines to this day. Lears attests:

Gramsci can inspire fresh thought...By clarifying the political functions of cultural symbols, the concept of cultural hegemony can aid intellectual historians trying to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures and social historians seeking to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate groups whom they victimize. (1985, p. 568)

While Lears is clearly prioritizing his own profession, clarifying political functions of cultural symbols has great use to not only historians, but the not-too-distant social science cousin of communications as well. Cinema is a global media art form that – in its varied incarnations – produces cultural symbols through creation, circulation, and meaning-making with audiences/consumers. Positioning the practices around distribution/exhibition of cinema (as is done in detail in Chapter V), and examining how power is being wielded and indeed maintained by specific dominating entities, is an intellectual activity in understanding cultural hegemony. In other words, by interrogating the grassroots efforts of d/e around documentary, one component of a complex relationship between media, global entertainment, and community activism is opened up, and helps ultimately to understand relations of power.

Lears points out that, for Gramsci, “The concept of hegemony has little meaning unless paired with the notion of domination. For Gramsci, consent and force nearly always coexist, though one or the other predominates.” (Lears, 1985, p.568) In the case of hegemony and media, including cinema, there presently exists a global oligarchy of

large multinational corporations who dominate Canada's, and much of the West's, mediascape.⁵ This has not been accomplished by force, although fascinating inroads continue to be made by scholars concerning the confluence of militarism and entertainment – sometimes called “militainment” or the *Military Entertainment Complex*. (Lenoir, 2000; Stockwell and Muir, 2003, p.14; Lawrence, 2005) Barring this consideration of media that promotes or is ultimately concerned with a non-critical stance on militarism or violent culture, the global media oligarchy currently maintains its status by consent, not force.

However, it is a consent maintained through the control and manipulation of choice. If three commercially-oriented multinationals own and control nearly 80% of one industry in a country, and the products that flow through this cartel (Straw, 1993) are not differentiated by any discernible quality other than a kind of “one-upmanship”⁶ within a genre (bigger budgets, bigger stars, bigger marketing campaigns), would it not be reasonable to say that the consumers or audience members at the other end of this industry are given little choice, and *forced* to “decide” between products that are more similar than they are different? The industry scenario just described is Canada's commercial cinema exhibition industry, and while there is the odd foreign, documentary, art house, or independent work that screens ephemerally and periodically in this matrix of concentrated ownership, many surveys carried out by the industry itself show that there is little choice outside deciding between texts that have originated creatively and/or fiscally from Hollywood.

⁵ Including all of the same authors cited in Chapter I, on page 13, paragraph 2.

⁶ A gender-specific term that captures the volatile, bellicose, and male-dominated business world of commercial distribution and exhibition.

In advanced capitalist, free market cultural climates, the argument that there is less real choice and therefore decreased diversity while there is steady increased production and proliferation of products across integrated global economies, is usually referred to as an “activist” or “anti-globalization” stance, at least in North America. (Allison, 2006; Murray, 1999) While this is certainly my contention, the purpose of this thesis is not to articulate and defend my own views about hegemony of mediascapes, but to enlist the intellectual work accomplished on (cultural) hegemony, stemming from Gramsci, “to illuminate concrete historical cases or political questions; or thinking large concepts [through] in terms of their application to concrete and specific situations.” (Hall, 1985, p.6) Writings that complicate the relationship of domination/subordination ultimately support the work of complicating the cultural hegemony of global media cartels and responses to them, especially as it relates to distribution and exhibition.

Lears writes that those in power (whether it is media cartels or governments) do not maintain domination by mere “moral authority,” but instead, “through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols; they must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order.” (1985, p.567) To this point, the historian scholar makes clearer the questions and connections between consent and distribution:

What components of a dominant culture require the consent of subordinates? Gramsci had in mind the values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices that support and define the existing distribution of goods, the institutions that decide how this distribution occurs, and the permissible range of disagreement about those processes. (1985, p.569)

Lears later excavates Gramsci’s work further to reveal the multifarious tensions in the relationship between “popular consciousness and capitalism.” (Ibid) This is significant, because hegemony is not a single “act” exacted for instance, as one state invades another;

it is a complex process of negotiations between ruling parties and subordinate parties, where power is maintained and exercised by those in rule by dominating the playing field of the consciousness of a particular populace. Lears maintains that the subordinated may be disaffected, or they may launch interventions. Indeed, they may even form counter-hegemonies, or challenges to hegemony by making structural and ideological change part of the same force in order to “come to a consciousness that allow[s] them to question their political and economic masters right to rule.” (Burke, 1999) But if those counter-hegemony movements are using tools and language supplied and dictated by the hegemonic party, such as MTV-style editing, then the very act of articulating a position – or constructing an independent discursive space that challenges the status quo – becomes difficult, and the resulting cultural output is often subsumed back into the cultural hegemonic fold.

In advanced capitalist systems the above process can be observed repeatedly as ‘subcultures’ are swallowed back into ‘mainstream’ or dominant culture, and in the process the ‘counter’ aspect fades as fast as the corporate past of Al Gore or a punk song that is used to sell cars. Is it a lack of staying power against hegemonic forces or a problem of articulating clear positions? Lears says that “people find it difficult, if not impossible, to translate the outlook implicit in their experience into a conception of the world that will directly challenge the hegemonic culture.” (Ibid) This may be true, but by seeing experience as social process in the way Williams provokes, cultural practices can be freed from essentialist subjectivities. As Khouri writes, this kind of project “is informed by cultural intelligibilities that are drawn from a complex historical process.” (2007, p.53) While Khouri is interested in the NFB’s role in the development of a

“working-class counter-hegemonic movement,” (Ibid) sifting cultural experience such as d/e practices presents itself as another site of investigation within a historical process.

Grassroots documentary d/e spaces are sites where counter-hegemonic practices – including those around grassroots or community-oriented documentary distribution and exhibition in Canada – develop and maintain the tools, language and process that build what Gramsci calls “contradictory consciousness.” (Gramsci, eds. Hoare and Smith, 1971, p.16). For Gramsci, consent is complex, and as a theorist firmly positioned against reductionism of any kind, he also did not see the relationship between dominant cultural currents and subordinated ones as linear, but as embodied in the fluid and complicated construction of consciousness that is each individual’s mental project. Williams connects said mental project(s) with social experience in order to complicate and understand cultural phenomena. In other words, just as the continuum of mainstream and alternative media articulations are always in a state of process and change, so too is hegemony as a cultural force always in a state of fluidity, flux, change and process.

A Gramscian analysis to cultural practices (such as those highlighted in Chapter IV) offers hope out of the binding dialectic of production/consciousness. American multinationals, and Hollywood in particular, have contributed to a cultural hegemony from interconnected economic, cultural and psychological relationships, and throughout history have at times formed what the Italian writer calls a “historical bloc.” (Gramsci, 1985, p.465) Peet explains that “Gramsci saw structures of physical means of production and social relations shaped by, and shaping, superstructures of ideology and political organization to form what he called historic blocks [sic].” (Peet, 2002, p.56) Hegemony, or “a prevailing common sense formed in culture, diffused by civic institutions,” (Ibid) is

globally harmonized by a populist consent translated in box office ticket sales, DVD rentals, and merchandise sales. However, the fluidity and multifaceted nature of this bloc allows for individuals and groups to carve out their own divergent paths in steps toward resisting hegemony, and ultimately power inequity in media, as well as individual experience.

The hegemony of the American media system (including cinema) is a populist, consumer-negotiated hegemony, and so the project of building counter-hegemonies to resist this dominant force finds inspiration in theories of radical democratic theory and practices. I utilize Williams's Gramscian-inspired description of the structure of feeling – where both scholars see not one indivisible, static force of domination by one hegemonic group, but several interlocking spheres in society. These 'fields' include variations of *the public* that form relationships across class, religious and ethnic lines to ultimately complicate and construct hegemony, or prevailing common sense (and taste, to include Bourdieu), at certain historical moments and in certain geographical locations. In considering the spatial relationship Canadian sites of d/e have with American (hegemonic) counterparts, it is advantageous to visit Peet's concept of "geographic hegemony," discussed in the following quote:

Discourses with hegemonic depth originate in political and economic command centers and achieve hegemonic extent by extending persuasion, coercion, and power over spatial fields of influence. Mutually reinforcing combinations of depth with extent create what I would term geographic blocs of states and institutions exercising power through globally hegemonic discourses. (2002, p.57)

While Peet uses his theory to leverage a discussion of the ANC in South Africa and their struggle to build democracy against the hegemonic tide of neoliberalism (Ibid, pp. 55-61), the work is useful in looking at counter-hegemonic responses in Canada to a

“geographic bloc” emanating from “command centers” of multinationals south of the border.

To summarize, grassroots documentary d/e spaces and practices have little representation in communication research, while there is ample theory on cultural hegemony (and responsive measures to cultural hegemony) in the literature. What is needed is an urgent discussion of sites of resistance and alternative practices that are counter to the commercial sector - in short, discursive and physical spaces where the power inequity of cinema distribution and exhibition practices in Canada are being challenged and shifted. Gramsci and others who have springboarded from his thinking, offer excellent departure points for an examination of community-oriented d/e practices within a Williams rubric of social experience. While the works just outlined describe hegemony, the next section theorizes counter-hegemony and counterpublic aspects.

Counterpublics and Counter-hegemony

The notion of countering dominant thinking or communication with different and diverse forms and meanings of cultural expression has been used as long as there has been oppression and resistance. Edward Said would call narratives that challenged dominant or hegemonic narratives “counterpoints,” (Said, quoted in Marrouchi, 1998), and Bhabha has written extensively on counternarratives. He argues: “Counternarratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities.” (Bhabha, 1990, quoted in Zimmermann, 2000, p.15). Communicating alternative narratives (counternarratives) in alternative spaces

(counterpublics) - such is the way of grassroots documentary d/e practices - leads to another compound, “counter-hegemony.” Ellie Rennie, in her book, *Community Media:*

A Global Introduction, introduces the term:

Radical media is better understood via theories of counterhegemony (disruptions to dominant power) and counter-public spheres (a term to describe the myriad and diverse spaces where discussion and dissent occur) as well as new social movement theory, rather than as simply oppositional. (2006, p.19)

Rennie has addressed a method to resist hegemony by recognizing alternative media’s ability to flourish in society’s spaces that are (re)claimed on an ongoing basis by a myriad of media groups and projects, including those that seek to challenge power imbalances through grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema. These practices and spaces run “counter” to those of dominant, or hegemonic, media and cinema currents described earlier in this chapter, and ultimately serve to challenge, dislodge and redistribute power. Of necessity, these challenges happen away from sites of hegemony (such as the megaplex) and in community-oriented sites (such as schools, homes, cafés, parks) where power is more easily negotiated/shared among various members of the community. Nancy Fraser writes: “If power is instantiated in mundane social practices and relations, then efforts to dismantle or transform the regime must address those practices and relations.” (1981, p. 280)

Jürgen Habermas’s seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) is crucial to any discussion of publics and counterpublics; it is arguably “indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice.” (Fraser, 1992, p.3) Habermas’s notion of the public sphere is, of course, highly problematic and with its own historically confined set of limitations, but it is also, as Fraser has noted,

essential as a foundational work. Fraser provides possibly the best summation of Habermas's public sphere, and the passage is worth quoting in full:

It designates a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it [is] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas's sense is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theatre for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. (Fraser, 1992, p.2)

Habermas's public sphere was predicated on exclusive privileged access, dependent on gender class, dress, income, etc. In short, the "public" constituted mostly middle-to-upperclass intellectual white males. Fraser points out that this is not the failure of the "public sphere" per se, but the failure of Habermas to recognize multiple, diverse public spheres that existed – and continue to exist – outside his bourgeois example, in what Fraser calls counterpublics. She identifies several "competing counterpublics including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working-class publics" (Ibid) Fraser's account reminds that the presence of a diverse and multifaceted (multiplicity) public remains instrumental in the struggle to resist domination regardless of what form.

Cultural spheres that reflect structural inequalities produced by "relations of dominance and subordination" (Ibid, p.12) are identified in the profit (or commercially-oriented) sector, as Fraser states:

In this public sphere, the media that constitute the material support for the circulation of views are privately owned and operated for profit. Consequently, subordinated social groups usually lack equal access to the material means of equal participation. (Ibid)

She is concerned with the counter-hegemonic ways in which equality and diversity can be achieved in multiple publics, in the face of dominant publics such as the bourgeois sphere described by Habermas, or the commercial media-controlled public spheres in the Canadian context. The spaces created to challenge domination and subordination are named *subaltern counterpublics* by Fraser, who also acknowledges that they are not, by nature or default, progressive and in fact can be anti-democratic (for instance, the subculture of Neo-Nazi Skinheads in modern England creates counterpublics, but most individuals involved remain committed to racist belief systems and violent methodologies). And just as dominant publics emerge to stake a societal claim in the public consciousness, counterpublics are continually built and articulated. Fraser writes: “Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space.” (Ibid, p.15)

It is debatable whether every counterpublic is the result of a concerted effort to respond to domination or subordination, but it is the contention of this thesis that it is an effective way for a community to articulate itself as part of a demos or public, in the face of the privatizing forces of neoliberalism. Democracy depends on diversity and plurality to be fully realized, and counterpublics offer routes toward such ideals. In Canada, the government has an official policy of Multiculturalism⁷, which purportedly champions these ideals, yet simultaneously does little to engender them in certain areas of the

⁷ From the Canadian Heritage site: “What is Multiculturalism? Canadian multiculturalism is fundamental to our belief that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding, and discourages ghettoization, hatred, discrimination and violence.” (http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/what-multi_e.cfm, accessed June 17, 2007)

country's mediascape. By utilizing the work of Habermas and Fraser, grassroots documentary d/e practices and spaces can be understood as elements of established or emerging counterpublics.

Embedded in Habermas's notion of the public sphere is a desire for debate and discussion between "private" individuals, free of influence of the state or industry. With the rise of corporate power eclipsing that of many states, (Carey, 1997) such a public sphere is now threatened by multinationals as well. There exist sets of powerful spheres today that articulate the wish-fulfillment of profit-seeking entities that now dominate most country's media. (McChesney, 1999) Colin Leys names the effects of these spheres on society and culture "market-driven politics" (Leys, 2001) and in his book by the same title provides an illuminating quote describing a new kind of political involvement, given the market domination of media: "In the more simplistic formulations of the role of the media democracy is like a political supermarket in which customers wander from counter to counter, assessing the relative attractions of the policies on offer before taking their well-informed selection to the electoral checkout." (Golding, quoted in Leys, 2001, pp. 109 & 110) This hyperbolic passage connects with a dominant discourse of "consumer-choice activism" where it is posited that there is no real need to build counterpublics, because consumers are ultimately in control of the market. Not without its share of detractors, this theory has been dismantled from a news media lens by Herman and Chomsky at great length in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).

To this point, Elizabeth Van Couvering writes in agreement with R.V. Betting in rejecting the idea "that the market alone should be the arbiter of the structure of the media industry, as might be appropriate for other types of products. Instead, he [Betting] is

operating with an assumption that the mass media are sites of public interest and public discussion, or, in short, of the public sphere which Habermas (1962) details as an essential element of rational and democratic government.” (Van Couvering, 2006, p.4)

Increasingly the market is dominating the mediascape and more and more mediated experiences are shaped, defined and to some extent controlled by commercial interests. (Schiller, 1989; Yudice, 1999; Thussu, 2000) In the context of cinema distribution and exhibition in Canada, this has amounted to spheres that are lacking diversity in content, (see Appendix A) as well as democratic participation.

Several factors have led to a Canadian cinema with next to no Canadian content, very little genre diversity, and virtually no variety in the way of foreign programming (other than American of course). (Dorland, 1998; Feldman, 2001; Melnyck, 2004; Beaty, 2006) Fraser writes that “participatory parity is essential to a democratic public sphere and that rough socio-economic equality is a precondition of participatory parity.” (1992, p.23) With this in mind, it is no great stretch to theorize a Canadian cinema industry dominated by a small handful of corporations (LaPierre, 2002) as one in somewhat of a democratic deficit. (Barney, 2005)

Counterpublics are sites of resistance and community-building. They are physical and discursive spaces that – regardless of socio-political and/or cultural affiliation – construct opportunities to address and resist inequities of power. In the realm of media these *counter-spaces* of community-building have been many, from citizen’s radio projects in Columbia (Rodriguez, 2001, p.109) to underground film festivals in major urban centers (Tyler, 1995; Gamson, 1996) to independent television projects. (Halleck, 2002) By grounding our understanding of counterpublics in the previous assumptions,

such initiatives become crucial for what Fraser calls “actually existing democracy in capitalist societies.” (Fraser, 1992, p.17)

Alexander Kluge has much to say on this topic as well, and while his terminology may differ slightly, his “oppositional public sphere” is akin to the concept of a counterpublic. Kluge emphasizes the importance of the public sphere to the construction of community:

...the ‘public sphere’ is the most fundamental project that exists. In terms of community, of what I have in common with other people, it is the basis for processes of social change. This means, I can forget about the concept of politics if I neglect the production of a public sphere. This is a claim to legitimacy which we must carefully insist upon and oppose against the many private needs – despite the fact that disappointment with the bourgeois public sphere, its failures, betrayals and distortions has led many leftist groups to reject a public sphere altogether. (Kluge, 1982, p.213)

Kluge has called the public sphere the “factory of politics” (Ibid) that is negotiated by “crawling under fences ... erected by corporations, by censorship, [and] by authority” (Ibid., p.214) in order to build community spaces. Because the base of society is so complex, Kluge believes that not all aspects of dominant, hegemonic spheres are always successful at muting diverse voices and counter-initiatives. He maintains, “All methods of domination and those of profit (whose agents do not always *want* to dominate but rather to make profit and thereby dominate markets, economies, salaries, etc.) contain a calculation of marginal utility.” (Ibid) It is precisely in the margins where counterpublics flourish, in the ‘spaces between’ shopping malls, four lane highways, factories and megaplexes. There, one will often find diversity that thrives on participation and complexity, spaces where films are shared, discussed, and debated. Kluge reminds us, that there are “incredible struggles and compromises involved when one wants to see a

film through the public sphere.” (Ibid.) Counterpublic sites of distribution and exhibition offer refuge from such frustration and tension, and by doing so, offer a glimpse into spaces where democracy and media entangle, and where pluralism tends toward a displacement of social hierarchy.

Media, Democracy, and Agonistic Pluralism

Dorothy Kidd, Bernadette Barker-Plummer and Clemencia Rodriguez have collaborated to produce a project that maps community media practices as formations of a counterpublic sphere, in order to build understanding of democratic practices in response to undemocratic tendencies. They write:

The current threat to the public sphere associated with the increasing privatization, commercialization and conglomeration of media systems is well documented. However, most research and knowledge production in this area has been of one kind...it has left out many critical actors and spheres of democratic communications – those of the counter-public sphere (Fraser 1990). ...that space in society where emerging or marginalized groups coalesce and work to form new collective identities, to mobilize into constituencies, and to articulate problems for redress. (Kidd, Barker-Plummer, Rodriguez, 2004, p.1)

These theorists conflate democratic media practices and the construction of counterpublics, and strongly argue “the importance of this sphere to a healthy democracy cannot be ignored.” (Ibid) They also identify three areas within the public sphere that relate to democratic communications, and these ‘categories’ will serve as “the spheres of action” (Ibid) some of which are utilized later in Chapter IV to discuss this inquiry’s research focal points of grassroots distribution/exhibition practice(s). They are (with relevant sites in parenthesis and sites looked at in the thesis in italics): the media reform sector (*Film Circuit*), the alternative or independent sector (*Cinema Politica*, Montreal

Underground Film Festival, or MUFF) and the social movement sector (Homeless Nation, CitizenShift). These categories are not autonomous, rigid areas of focus with clear boundaries. They are merely heuristic devices used for discussing qualities of counterpublics. Spheres of action are in fact interlocking, interconnected and fluid contact zones of community-building, small scale commerce, governmentality,⁸ and cultural resistance that work toward democratic ideals.

In Darin Barney's contribution to *The Canadian Democratic Audit* Series, he attempts to define democracy by imbuing the problematic term with the following guiding principles: participation, accessibility and responsiveness. Barney cautiously adds that when these tendencies are not directed toward equalizing power in society, there is a move away from democracy as opposed to towards it. (Barney, 2005, p.152) It should be said that while Barney is certainly influenced by Habermas's work, he does not deploy the "counternarrative" language in his discussion of democracy and media in Canada. As has been mentioned, counterpublic spaces can be seen as constructive zones that harness these principles in order to challenge, offset, and ultimately equalize power imbalances throughout human culture. In the face of increased media mergers and the consolidation of corporate power at all levels of society, counterpublics are vital to democracy regardless of what area each localized initiative may best fit into.

Applying Barney's qualities to present-day Canadian society elicits skepticism as to whether the country is indeed moving toward democracy, at least when one examines the 'public sphere(s)' of the mediascape. In terms of access and with regard to cinema in particular, there is little opportunity for "average citizens" to affect programming at

⁸ Druick describes governmentality as "an ethos of management operating at the level of daily routines and crystallized in social institutions." (Druick, 2007, p.4)

commercial exhibition sites, and further, there remains an exclusionary quality to commercial zones – where possession of currency (cash or card), normative (heteronormative, conservative, “acceptable”) dress, and normative (shopping) behaviour are all unspoken requirements for entry. (Davis, 1999, p.453) This is not to say that commercial exhibition sites – although part of the dominant media sphere(s) – are not also sites of political and socio-economic tension and struggle, where conflicts are often between local groups and management or regional governments negotiating the intricacies of international trade agreements. Charles Acland writes:

Significantly, commercial cinema venues, those specially constructed spaces intended to appeal to wide audiences, are one site at which the various struggles over globalization are being played out, sometimes concerning economics, but also concerning national legal structures, the future role of various levels of government, the selective mobilization of people, the uncertain continued existence of older cultural forms and practices, and so on. (2003, p.32)

Still, commercial cinema sites offer a window into the historical bloc that is currently forming an imbricate matrix of media spheres around the world that consolidate power into the hands of owners and management elites, while significant challenges to media hegemony appear at the margins, perched away from commercial sites. Megaplexes and other commercial cinema venues are – other than the film texts themselves – the most reified example of cinema culture as articulated by a global media cartel like Viacom, for example, who owns Paramount Pictures (one of the “big seven” Hollywood studios) and Dreamworks SKG, as well as CBS Television and Radio and distribution arms.

A healthy democracy that is predicated on diversity and plurality is perhaps the central thread to Chantal Mouffe’s radical democratic project, and is indeed at the heart of her concept of a renovated democracy that she has named “agonistic pluralism.”

(2005, p.6) While both Mouffe and Rodriguez harness and reclaim the nomenclature of civic society discourse, *citizenship* is a term they use to convey participation in building democratic spaces through political action, and in particular, media. Mouffe writes: “Citizenship, if it is to be exercised, needs to be linked to a *demos*, a political community.” (2002, p.12) She goes on to discount claims that the only *demos* that can provide such community originates in the state apparatus or from ethnic heritage. Alternately, political communities can be formed “from the ground up” (Ibid) and provide spaces where antagonisms can be articulated as agonisms, where consensus is rejected as an ultimate liberal fantasy, and instead, diversity and pluralism are the offspring of political engagement in alternative spaces (or, counterpublic spheres).

Mouffe seeks to offer a post-Marxist “third way” approach to liberalism and democratic theory, in order to wage a war against the ‘middling’ of Western politicking, as well as against the steadfast withdrawal of individuals from civic engagement and political action. Mouffe sees the central problem of liberal democratic theory and practice to be the idea that divergent ideologies and positions are forced to reach compromise and agreement, when in fact this “melting pot” process may do more damage to democracy by undermining diversity and pluralism instead of reinforcing it. For instance, if a majority in society “accept” the limited choices they are “cajoled” to make at the box-office, and so continue to pay to see films from the Hollywood majors, then Mouffe will argue we will slowly move toward a middleground of total acceptance of this system. And by acquiescing to dominant power structures such as the Hollywood sphere of influence and power that exists in Canada, a nascent legitimization of such entities takes place, ultimately normalizing their power, existence and influence, and in turn

radicalizing opposition or counterpoints (Said, 1991) in the eyes of a larger (mainstream) public.

Mouffe is concerned with recognizing how hegemony is articulated and composed, as well as responses that engender social cohesion to oppose and build alternatives. She writes:

It requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency...Sedimented social practices are a constitutive part of any possible society; not all social bonds are put into question at the same time...The frontier between the social and the political is essentially unstable and requires constant displacements and renegotiations between social agents. (2005, pp.17,18)

Mouffe discounts the “post-political” description of Western capitalist societies, where antagonisms are overcome and ultimately denied fermentation in society. Instead, Mouffe advocates for democratic practices that recognize us/them constructions, that is, practices that build from antagonisms, instead of repressing them. Mouffe believes that there are certain political divides that are not always possible to overcome, and by pretending that we have – as is her charge against liberal democratic capitalist countries like Canada – we ultimately deny “the political.” By recognizing conflict for what it is, and shifting the discursive and physical spaces to foster agonism, Mouffe believes that societies move toward democratic ideals like plurality and diversity. “The political” for Mouffe, is distinguishable from *politics* and is an engagement she describes as “the dimension of antagonism as an ever present possibility in human relations” (2002, p.12) that is “linked to the acts of hegemonic institution.” (2005, p.17) By complicating democratic theory to highlight difference and plurality over assimilation and multiculturalism, Mouffe

provides a framework to address alternative or grassroots sites of community-building in the documentary sector.

Writers like Chantal Mouffe and Clemencia Rodriguez seek to free alternative media from the theoretical confines of oppositional analysis and so many binaries (Rodriguez, 2001, p.13), and to recognize these counter-spaces and practices as legitimate articulations of community (and community media) in their own right. Rodriguez agrees with Dorothy Kidd when she points out that communication scholars have been guilty of “relegating alternative media to a footnote” (Ibid.) and have had so much difficulty in framing alternative media practices as community building blocks rather than mere oppositional sites of struggle. Indeed, community-oriented sites and practices around grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema constitute complex zones of opposition *as well as* radical democratic spaces of information access, sharing, and construction. Counterpublic spaces and practices are sites of empowerment, (Higgins, 1999) where power is redistributed to – in the case of documentary distribution/exhibition – artists, audiences, and organizers. For democracy, it is, to quote a subheading from Rodriguez, where “power explodes, [and] the new political subject emerges.” (Ibid.) There are concrete examples of these dynamic spaces outlined in Chapter IV, such as film screenings at raves, and community screenings bridging understanding between police forces and First Nations groups. Indeed, *watching* films is but one element of d/e spaces, where social interaction trumps economic transactions. As *Witness*’s recent *Video Advocacy Institute*, held at Concordia in Montreal, illustrates,

screenings can provide opportunity for workshops, discussions, debates, and catalytic props for effecting policy.⁹

Theorizing alternative media practices and radical democracy is at the forefront of contemporary communications work, and lifts the veil of past work that has failed to cajole such media out of the margins and into the foreground. There is excellent academic work that analyses the corporate media cartels¹⁰, (McChesney, 1999; Bagdikian, 1987, 2004; McDonald and Wasko, 2007) just as there are ample published texts extolling the virtues of alternative media as oppositional efforts against said cartels. (Downing, 2000; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Langlois and Dubois, 2005; Skinner, 2006) Alternative media spaces that are described exclusively as oppositional constitute what Nancy Fraser calls “weak publics,” where “deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making.” (1993, p.24) Mouffe, Rodriguez and others provide a new and exciting direction for conceptualizing alternative media spaces and practices, one that tends to lift the murky residue of essentialism and instead complicates, invigorates, and legitimates these phenomena as counterpublics that build democracies.

Community-oriented documentary distribution and exhibition sites and practices do not fit neatly into one envelope labeled “oppositional,” but many represent real actions against hegemony, and in this sense they can be viewed as “confrontational,” a tendency that Mouffe believes to be a vital ingredient to democracy. She writes:

⁹ Witness is a non-profit organization dedicated to using video practices to expose human rights violations and instigate change. The institute was the first instalment by the organization, and was held in the summer of 2007 with over 40 activists attending workshops and other events from around the world. (Source: email from Liz Miller, advisor to the VAI)

¹⁰ Evidence of this is found in Derek Hrynyshyn's Review Essay for the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, entitled, “The Mainstreaming of Media Critique,” Vol.30, No.4, 2005.

Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order. Breaking with the symbolic representation of society as an organic body – characteristic of the holist mode of organization – a pluralist liberal democratic society does not deny the existence of conflicts but provides the institutions allowing them to be expressed in an adversarial form. ... A well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions. This is what the confrontation between left and right needs to be about. (2005, p.30)

Mouffe has launched an insurrection into democratic theory in order to change the ways scholars frame and analyze political actions in the public realm. Her work indeed influences subsequent chapters in this inquiry, informing the project of threading communication theoretical frameworks with democratic and political theory. It is an engagement with alternative media practices as complicated, autonomous sites of research for academics to address the problem space(s) around such work. It is the notion of alternative media sites and practices as intervention that I now turn to for a brief mention.

Documentary: Media as Intervention

A coterie of consummate *docophiles* have flooded bookstores, academic libraries and magazine shops with words describing the genre in a myriad of textual-focused forays. At the academic forefront are Michael Renov, Erik Barnouw, Stella Bruzzi, Jane M. Gaines, and Bill Nichols. This list is not exhaustive, but meant to highlight some of the leading researchers and writers in the field, who together, continue to dominate the literature with an aesthetic/textual approach that is lacking in the type of context that political economy and cultural studies discussions around d/e brings. From Barnouw's *Documentary: a history of non-fiction film* (1993) to Renov's *The Subject of Documentary* (2004), these

authors have chosen to survey the genre and retrieve texts through descriptive analysis. Barnouw's pedagogical volume is particularly saturated with scores of titles of films from around the world, and moves through history describing how they came to be produced and what they look like. There are gem-like moments where Barnouw touches on the importance of d/e, such as when he describes the Danish Underground's efforts in WWII, wherein armed guerrillas commandeer a cinemahouse, show subversive films critical of the Nazi regime, then disappear after the screenings. (Barnouw, 1993, p. 251) The film scholar connects these unorthodox methods for disseminating documentary with a palpable shift in the Danish populations' perceptions toward the Germans and the war itself. (Ibid)

Renov has provided students of documentary with compilations of essays entitled, *Theorizing Documentary* (1993), *Collecting Visible Evidence* (co-edited with Gaines, 1999), and his newest book, *The Subject of Documentary*.¹¹ Renov's indexes like the bulk of material itself, contain no mention of distribution nor exhibition, and like his peers, he steers steadfastly toward a thick description of texts and time periods, with nary a mention of where the same films are screened or how they come to be screened. His latest offering is less an analysis of the genre than it is an exploration into the practices of self-ethnography and self-reflexivity through the subjective practices in various forms of non-fiction, including mediums beyond cinema.

While not as prolific in volumes specific to documentary, Bruzzi has concentrated more on cinema in general, but offers *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (2000), a survey of documentary production-oriented activity of the last two decades leading up

¹¹ It should be mentioned that Thomas Waugh has been influential as an academic writing on documentary, and will continue in the vein of Renov's latest with his forthcoming, *The Right To Play Oneself: Essays on Documentary*, slated to be published in 2008.

to the year it was published, and provides some analysis around issues such as gender, queer politics, and race. Bruzzi, unlike Barnouw, focuses largely on Western-Anglo documentaries, and thus does not fulfill the anticipated and much-needed international survey of the genre. Gaines's work is relatively prolific, with an emphasis on women and cinema. While Gaines has also cast a wide net into the ocean of fiction cinema, her forthcoming book promises to focus on non-fiction, and the suggestive title of *The Documentary Destiny of Cinema* seems to prescribe to the future the continued ascension of the genre within the mediascape.

Nichols's oeuvre is perhaps the most accessed by educators, with his *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) providing yet another (Western-Anglo-centric) survey of the genre, using individual films to highlight trends and shifts in the field. While many (including Lacey) point to the success of a handful of films like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004), *Supersize Me* (Spurlock, 2004) and *The Corporation* (Achbar and Abbott, 2003) as the arbiters of the ascension of documentaries in predominantly Western nations, an increasingly robust group of academics are colouring the cultural spotlight of the documentary form. Among recent contributions, Paul Ward's *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (2005) pushes the boundaries of a film-by-film and interview-by-interview account of the trajectory of non-fiction cinema, by interrogating new blurred borders of documentary, from the hybrid films of Nick Broomfield to internet sites. There is also an endless supply of literature on making documentaries, from DIY manifestos to video activist handbooks. Again, these works too often focus on production at the cost of d/e. While the handful of authors and works just listed are important pieces in the "documenting of documentary," (Nichols, Grant and Sloniowski, 2002) they are

demonstrative examples of the academic work as of late. I now turn to another author pushing boundaries in her reading of documentary cinema.

Patricia Zimmermann's book *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, draws the discursive spaces of cultural hegemony, public sphere and counterpublics, and media and democracy together into writing that celebrates documentary cinema as intervention. While much of the book is devoted to mapping the siphoning of public funding for the arts in the USA Zimmermann consistently connects documentary practices with social movements and political struggles. While it has been stated on previous pages that these alternative media practices are indeed heterogeneous, and should not be reduced to "resistance media," or "activist cinema," it is insightful to draw on recent work by Zimmermann and others like David Whitefield, in discussing documentary practices as counterpublics, counter-hegemonies, and socio-political and/or cultural, interventions.

Zimmermann however, focuses on production and textual analysis to a fault. The "war" that she describes is one over the public arts, and on one side are myopic governments and avaricious corporations, and on the other, an activist army made up of media producers. While her work would benefit with some mention of the sites and practices around the distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema, her analysis is useful for adding another layer to the theories explored in these pages. The discursive formations that have been described represent an inverse pyramid: at the apex are localized interventions around documentary d/e, at the base are private/public spheres dominated by large, powerful entities that produce a cultural hegemony which keep the imbalance.

Zimmermann is interested in the piercing potential of the apex, and sets the tone for documentary as a combative force in the following passage from her aforementioned book: “Documentaries repudiate the fictions of the nation with the real, the document, the historical, the particular, and it is these negations and refusals that provoke the offensives to close down all public cultures.” (2000, p.15) And while her argumentation tends toward the type of binaries that Mouffe seeks to overcome, Zimmermann invigorates the documentary genre by treating it as a force with which to combat cultural hegemony, either as the films themselves, or in the case of this inquiry, as practices around dissemination and public viewing.

While her metaphorical and bombastic language may be difficult for the so-called non-converted to accept, there *is* a war of sorts that exists over the public spaces in advanced capitalist societies. She writes: “It is a war about whether public spaces will exist; whether they will be zones of fantasy projections for the transnationals, or zones of contestation, insurgency, and community with access to the means of production and distribution.” (Ibid, p. 14) Zimmermann offers two alternatives, but in this inquiry I argue that there are in fact multiple, overlapping, interlocking positions in the “war.” Three have been identified by Rodriguez and company, and are used to complicate Zimmermann’s notion of the battleground. That said, she is describing an insurrection over public space, and in fact, the act of creating counterpublics and counter-hegemonies. Following this, Zimmermann does at times harmonize with Mouffe, as in the following passage, pitting homogenous liberalism against heterogeneous collectivism (community):

This is a war over a discursive territory, a war over how the public spaces of the nation are defined and mapped, a war between the faux homogeneity of corporatist multiculturalism that absorbs and vaporizes difference and a radical heterogeneity that positions difference(s) and

conflict(s) as a core of contestation over identity with frisson as its *modus operandi*. (Ibid., p.13)

The positioning of documentary practices within this volatile battleground helps to justify a focus on the genre and those who work and interact in its spaces. Zimmermann says that documentary, notably newer documentaries, have “insisted on an expanded formation of nation at exactly the time that transnational capital has required only an essentialized symbolic nation” (Ibid, p.12). Through the process of “expansion” she believes that documentaries have interrupted, jarred, and interrogated and reorganized socio-political realities and spaces. In short, documentary has intervened in the dominant (fantasy) media spheres, expanding and dissolving (formerly) rigid borders from everything from nation to gender. (Ibid, p.13)

Zimmermann sees technology as “loosening up” obdurate borders around public spaces, and enabling a wider base access and participation in the mechanics associated with media-making and dissemination. This is of utmost concern for any work that looks at distribution and exhibition, as grassroots practices continue to be (re)invigorated by technology that enables greater access such as open source software and ICTs that improve networking and communication across vast distances. And while technology is playing a role to expand documentary-making and dissemination in the hands of more and more “non-professionals,” ultimately expanding the public sphere, Zimmermann argues that it is not enough – there needs to exist an interconnected social movement of media-makers and disseminators who can advance the stance of documentary as a tool of intervention in an increasingly corporatized (and culturally hegemonic) world; in other words, against neoliberalism. Halleck has put forward a similar argument for community

television in her book, *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (2002).

Zimmermann's firebrand theories do integrate with other thinkers' notions of democracy, including those mentioned in the previous pages. What she shares with other scholars examining democracy and media is the idea that a democratic public sphere is dependent on access and diversity (Ibid, p.4). What makes her specifically of interest for this thesis, however, is that Zimmermann sees documentary as an avenue for achieving such goals, and embroiders them together as such: "...three of the central tenets underpinning an oppositional, independent documentary strategy [are]: access, diversity, and a democratic public sphere." (Ibid)

Zimmermann's argument comes at a time when nation-states and their connected public media institutions are undergoing a constant metamorphosis, a restructuring to fit with a historical bloc that continues to convince the Western world of the inevitability of the market (Spicer and Fleming, 2003; Peet, 2002). Free market policies have caused public funding for the arts, including documentary cinema, to be vigorously slashed (Observatoire du documentaire/Documentary Network Brief, 2005). As well, media consolidation puts decision-making power, and resources, into the hands of fewer and fewer *men* who are increasingly disconnected from local communities (Norberg-Hodge, 1996; Barnet and Cavanagh, 1996) (Giddens calls this offshoot of globalization "disembeddedness"). In support of these trends are the media-makers, intellectuals, academics, educators, and policy-makers Bourdieu (1998) criticizes and chastises, those who continue to convince constituencies of the utopian fantasy of a "post-political" or

consumer-over-citizen modeled (Mouffe, 2005) democratic world where antagonism and division is “managed” by charters and legal systems.

Consideration of all these factors, along with the increased popularity of documentary cinema in the world today, (Zimmermann, 2000; Druick, 2007; *Profile 2007*, 2007) leads this investigation to the exploration of documentary practices as cultural interventions and d/e practices and spaces as worthy research areas.

The literature explored in this chapter illuminates interlocking and interrelated areas between hegemony, publics and documentary practices. By complicating causal relationships like *audience choice equals diversity*, the complex fragments of hegemony and counter-hegemonic spaces become more clear. The “problem” of cinema diversity and cultural hegemony in Canada is a multifaceted matrix of publics all seeking self-interest, whether it is action carried out on behalf of corporate shareholders, elected officials, or environmental activists.

Theorizing alternative media practices has seen some recent exciting turns, and this thesis draws from approaches outlined in this chapter to introduce the neglected aspects of grassroots documentary distribution and exhibition. By analyzing the counterpublic spaces and practices around this genre, research can expose sites of resistance, opposition, and community. Focusing on localized community-building spaces that are defined by media, responding to media, and/or even using dominant media tools, brings light to the dark corners of an industry that has seen most of the attention go to the content on the screen and to the Hollywood “system.” Miller et al. summarize:

Instead, we should acknowledge the policy, distributional, promotional and exhibitionary protocols of the screen at each site as much as their

textual ones. Enough talk of 'economic reductionism' without also problematizing 'textual reductionism.' Enough valorization of close reading and armchair or behavioural accounts of human inferiority without ethical and political regard for the conditions of global cultural labour and the significance of the workers, texts and subjectivities within social movements and demographic cohorts. (2005, p.43)

To this manifesto, I add: Enough discussion of textual context without describing and analyzing place. Enough discussion about documentary as propaganda or ultimate lens-based truth, without discussing the role of dissemination and exhibition. It is time to discuss counterpublic spaces that are community-building d/e initiatives around documentary film, and not dismissible fringe resistance 'flare-ups.' To mobilize this discussion, I now turn to an abridged history of these issues in Canada.

CHAPTER III – HISTORICAL CONTEXT – D/E DISCURSIVE SPACES

The early control by American capital over the Canadian film production industry in the 1920s shaped how cinema, as a new cultural medium, came to be perceived among the Canadian public. Despite the high level of domestic control and ownership over mushrooming exhibition theatres, and in conjunction with the explosion of film production in the United States, Canadian film distributors and theatre owners had very little to offer in terms of Canadian-made films. This eventually led to a unilateral flow of American influence over Canada's cinematic culture and practice at least up until the late 1930s.

(Malek Khouri, 2007, p.41)

Despite the fact that dozens of Canadian films are released each year, it is rare to find Canadian films screening at local movie theatres outside of Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto...many in the Canadian film industry observe that since Canadian films are almost completely shut out of both the Canadian and American film markets, it is unfair to make box-office comparisons with well-promoted American blockbusters.

(Bart Beaty, 2006, pp. 148&149)

(In fact, I hate that distinction, America versus Canada. I always think of Canadians as Americans as well.) Still, with such diverging perspectives in the United States and Canada on cultural issues, there are, admittedly, some fundamental differences between the two.

(John A. Ragosta, 1997, p.1)

At this year's *Hot Docs Festival* both American and Canadian attendees were in agreement that the festival has become one of the industry's biggest, most essential events. The 2007 edition saw 222 Canadian documentary submissions land on jury members laps, and among the thousands of festival attendees, a palpable energy seemed to indicate massive faith in the continuing flourishing and populism of documentary

cinema north of the 49th parallel. In one evening during the opening nights of the festival, after the mad throngs of pitching and networking filmmakers and industry elite had quieted, there was a chance to reflect on Canada's seemingly burgeoning documentary industry. On a hushed terrace some fifteen meters from one such social event – albeit one that was settling into the Toronto night – I informally talked with some of the country's cultural stakeholders, and was ultimately provided with some surprising revelations concerning the position of artists and of this thesis's concern with documentary distribution and exhibition in Canada.

In several discussions with filmmakers and a few Public Broadcasting “gatekeepers” otherwise known as commissioning editors, the position that is often articulated by industrial corporate elite washed over me from the mouths of independent artists and public bureaucrats. In response to my now-standard query, “Why don't we see more Canadian and documentary films in Canada's movie theatres?” came the self-defeatist bare-bones response: “Canadians need to make better films.” While the relaying of this experience is meant to be anecdotal and is completely informal, the questions raised persist throughout professional scholarship and popular writing alike.

Indeed, it would seem the kind of indoctrination has been reached that Pierre Bourdieu has so excellently identified in *Acts of Resistance Against the Tyranny of the Market*. (1998) He describes the process of cultural inculcation as the return of individualism, of a ‘blame the victim’ mentality that has been established and indentured in advanced capitalist societies through the normalization of regressive neoliberal thinking until concomitant policies and ideologies have become dominant, “normal” popular belief within the public sphere. This slowly implemented feat is achieved vis-à-

vis the ‘work’ of politicians, intellectuals and media-makers. (1998, pp. 2-9) Considering that evening at *Hot Docs*, it would seem this support of free-market ‘norms’ has been achieved in Canada – at least with some from this small and informal sampling of documentary ‘players.’

Despite contrary evidence found in nearly every other sector of Canadian media that is guaranteed some level of protection and/or regulation, many academics and artists still believe that the “problem” of Canada’s film industry lies in the inability – or unwillingness – of the country’s filmmakers to replicate the enormously successful Hollywood formula. I have named this *The More Meatballs Argument*, after the film *Meatballs* (1979, with a remake slated for 2010), by L.A.-based Canadian filmmaker Ivan Reitman, who is one of the most outspoken champions of this myopic position. The unwillingness is, however, found with Reitman and company in their lack of consideration for other factors in the failure of the Canadian film industry. Theirs is an argument rooted in blind belief in the market, in the hallucinatory championing of the power of consumer choice to deliver diversity – including domestic and documentary products – to the cinema screens of Canada.

Mike Gasher has critiqued this argument, and in particular Steven Globerman in his piece, “The Myth of Meritocracy,” (1992) where he says that commentators like Globerman “ignore the political economy of the Canadian film industry.” (Ibid) Acland has also attacked this position recently as culturally obtuse. In response to *More Meatballs* commentator Steven Globerman, Acland writes:

Yet when he tries to account for the difficulties Canadian films have getting distribution, he has to fall rather lamely on the insupportable claim that Canadian films are not good enough, a claim that reveals a set of

assumptions about cultural value beneath the supposedly neutral measures of economic potential and market power. (Acland, 2003, p.182)

The ultimate logic and sacrosanctity of the free market (as the great equalizer) is part of a global neoliberal ideology identified and critiqued by Bourdieu (1998) and countless others, including the oft-cited Chomsky and McChesney, whose work joins forces in the title that resistance movements invert as a rallying cry against neoliberalism: “Profit Over People” (Chomsky, 1998).

The particularity of Acland’s observations – that culture and cultural products do not fit neatly into the free market rationale – is also found in the recently published *Blockbusters and Trade Wars: Popular Culture in a Globalized World*, by Peter S. Grant and Chris Wood. In a chapter called “Curious Economics” they argue that many cultural products and exchanges are “public goods” (Grant and Wood, 2004, p.56) that should not be treated as commodities under international trade rules set out by bodies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Concerning cinema, they argue that a DVD exchanging hands is a private transaction, subject to such trade regulations, but the broadcast or licensing of a documentary film is a service and is more complicated concerning trade and regulations.

Grant and Wood summarize:

...free competition will theoretically produce a market equilibrium at which the price of any good is equal to its marginal cost and social welfare is maximized. This is what economists call an “efficient” market, since theoretically no other price could improve on the market outcome without making someone worse off.

The trouble with applying this theory to cultural goods is that these goods fail to support a single one of its underlying assumptions. (2004, p.57)

These authors are introducing the tension between rigid economic models and the cultural fluidity of cinema, which represents a shift in the history of discourse on cinema and cinema practices in Canada. However, despite their efforts, the problem of d/e remains bogged down in culturally misguided attitudes and assumptions articulated by Reitman, Globerman, filmmakers, policymakers and even the Canadian public.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an abridged history of the ways in which these dominant assertions have come to occupy the minds of the cultural elite in Canada, as well as to highlight other discursive spaces and policies that have percolated throughout the volatile and anticlimactic trajectory of Canadian cinema distribution and exhibition (with an emphasis on documentary).

A clutch of important texts has been produced over the years that focus on Canada's (feature) film industry, or lack thereof. While none exist that take for their focus distribution and exhibition, nearly all – with some exceptions – devote all too little attention to this crucial aspect of a half billion dollar per year industry (*Profile 2007*). In the most recent government-sponsored report to emerge from the annals of Ottawa, *Profile 2007: An Economic Report on the Canadian Film and Television Production Industry*, distribution/exhibition is not even addressed in the introduction. Instead, there is a concentration on the techno-determinist celebration of multiplatforming and Canada's opportunity to engage in "one of the most exciting periods in the history of audio-visual production and distribution." (Ibid, p.4) Rhetoric gleefully cheering "wave[s] of progress" that are "rolling through the world" colourfully replaces perhaps a more somber, but realistic beginning that might describe the complete domination of cinema "shelf space" by the Hollywood majors. (Grant and Wood, 2006)

This newest government report (conducted by Erin Research Group) is no anomaly – it fits into a long lineage of similarly evasive reports by Federal Departments, Standing Committees, Senate Hearings, and CRTC briefs. Since the founding of the National Film Board (NFB) in 1939, Canada has resembled a country with a film industry of some sort, or at the very least a country discussing the perceived presence of a film industry. Three distinguishable levels of engagement with production, distribution and exhibition of fiction and non-fiction cinema in the country have manifested the decades that have followed the creation of the NFB – the most important documentary production institution the country has known. Indeed, this thesis maps out some of their overlapping zones, albeit amounting to an abbreviated historical account, but with the aim of providing some context to the present-day environment that grassroots, community-oriented distribution and exhibition practices exist in relation to a consolidated, commercially-oriented industry. In other words, it is one route in addressing the “problem” (i.e., lack of diversity, lack of Canadian content) of the Canadian film industry, in order to contextualize today’s responses to it. The zones of engagement are (1) the interlocking areas of media (independent film and documentary) advocacy and activism, (2) policy and policy-making, and (3) commercially-oriented, market-driven/defining industry activity. Threads stitching powerful seams that forge these zones as well as threads that entangle and obfuscate relationships of power and stake-claiming are replete throughout decades of literature on this subject.

While production and feature fiction film are the two dominant areas of focus foregrounded by policy-makers, academics and other writers, there are tears in the mesh where some have forwarded documentary and distribution/exhibition. As stated, such

articulations that illustrate the importance of documentary and the genre's right to fight for a stake in Canada's film industry, coupled with the odd rupture in the production fabric that allows for distribution/exhibition to receive due scrutiny, are rare but crucial contributions. Canada is not without a history of such permeations, and the following pages of this chapter will provide some illumination in tracing their tracks. One text in particular deserves singling out for its success in forwarding distribution/exhibition over textual analysis. Manjunath Pendakur's *Canadian Dreams & American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry* (1990) brings a political economic analysis to the discussion of Canada's cinema, whereby the very question of a "national cinema" is re-routed, and articulated as a story not of what is on the screen and how these lines of power are articulated, but who in fact controls what is on the screen. The book tends toward the type of cultural commodification (of Canadian film) that Raymond Williams seeks to avoid, yet follows a framework of "radical political economy" (Pendakur, 1990, p.13) that exposes the intricate relationships between American media corporations, Canadian exhibition sites (and distribution to and from) and government policy. While the writing is inspired by Dallas Smythe and Herbert Schiller, its breakdown of power and control certainly constitutes mention in any Gramscian approach to cultural practices.

As Pendakur, Dorland and many others mentioned have successfully outlined various threads of the history of the Canadian film industry this thesis does not endeavour to do the same. There are some significant starting points however, and this chapter uncovers some. What is important to this investigation is the overall currents, trends, tendencies and waves that have led to the current state of affairs. Why is it that the

abysmal level of Canadian content in cinemas in Canada is the same in 2006 as it was thirty years ago in 1976? (Acheson and Maule, 1998) Why are artists, advocates and activists building similar arguments now as they were at the end of the sixties, in their bid to see more Canadian content and more documentaries in the cinema houses of the nation, when such tactics have yielded little success? Why has the problem of American domination been so clearly identified for several decades, albeit seldom foregrounded, yet has remained as unchanged as the Canadian government's response to it? Finally, concerning the film industry, why has distribution and exhibition been treated in much the same way regionalism and labour has been – that is to say, with minor mention and never the focus of attention? What follows is a historical summary – a tracking of one area of the structure of feeling around d/e in Canada – and a segment examining the NFB initiative *Challenge for Change* as a historical intervention/response to problems not only identified in production content, but in the processes and actions around distribution and exhibition.

Distribution and Domination

Three seminal volumes of literature have been produced in the last fifteen years that offer a historical-based analysis of Canada's struggle to build a viable, diverse, and artist-friendly film industry. *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Magder, 1993), *So Close to the State/s: The Emergence of Canadian Feature Film Policy* (Dorland, 1998), and *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Melnick, 2004) do not comprise an exhaustive list but certainly represent the most cited works regarding film policy in Canada. A preliminary investigation into these texts' table of contents and

indexes is a revealing exercise, indicative of the larger discursive space(s) that such works are derived from. Not one mention of distribution or exhibition appears in any of the three tables of contents. While each book undeniably addresses the problems and struggles around d/e, not one of the three authors is compelled to single out the area as part of a chapter heading, or as an entire chapter unto itself. Distribution/exhibition, while mysteriously vacant from content listings, is found in the three indexes however, and perhaps this paradoxical placement and aforementioned lack of positioning is most prevalent in Dorland's index, where the first listing for "distribution" retrieves the following: "distribution: American domination of" and "attempted rationalization of." (Dorland, 1998, p.192) Clearly, there is a heady position responding to an admitted hegemony in Dorland's work, as in others, yet it is never singled out or clearly foregrounded in his text.

It should be mentioned that two more recent texts have been published that discuss the problems of d/e in Canada at great length, with Charles Acland's *Screen Traffic* even singling out a chapter that devotes many pages to identifying key aspects to the issues. Acland, citing other works mentioned above, identifies some of the key problem areas, including policy. He writes: "On the contrary, policymakers have been historically reluctant to force exhibitors to present Canadian films." (Acland, 2003, p.176) Later, he reiterates the position of past critics such as Magder, when he writes:

Undergirding these assessments is a conviction that Canadian distribution is essential to the invigoration of a Canadian popular cinema. The problem has been that when U.S. majors own domestic rights to distribute films, those rights encompass Canada. (Ibid, p.177)

Acland does not, however, outrightly agree with such assessments, and seeks to complicate the problem away from reductive political economy critiques by positioning

the cultural practices and tastes of the moviegoing Canadian public. In later pages of the same chapter he dissects the “overemphasis” on d/e, particularly, “on commercial exhibition as a symptom of the ailing status of Canadian film in public and policy discourse” which has “led to a substantial misinterpretation of the ‘problem’ of the national cinema culture.” (Ibid, p.183) Part of this misinterpretation, at least for Acland, is in the underestimated and understudied habits and tastes of Canadian audiences. The conversation is then shifted to the commercial and cultural landscape(s) of Canada, with details on Alliance Atlantis, a Canadian d/e company recently acquired by US-based multinational financing firm Goldman Sachs and partner CanWest Global. At the time of writing the merger had gone through and reports of increased “foreign control” of Canadian media is found in mainstream media.¹²

In discussing d/e problem sets in *Screen Traffic*, Acland successfully problematizes a simple political economy analysis of domination/subordination and mixes in the cultural currents of the Canadian public, drawing on Bourdieu’s treatise on taste (*Distinction*, 1986), as well as his conceptual framework for *habitus* (1990). Ultimately, this new direction that Acland and others are embarking on is a post-hegemony discussion – where the age-old arguments of Hollywood’s grip on Canada’s cinema is acknowledged but not poured over and centred as the defining aspect of this country’s cinema landscape.¹³ Indeed, much of the history of cinema, especially issues around distribution and exhibition, has been acutely constructed and dismantled through

¹² The latest reportage on this acquisition/merger/consolidation is found in Rita Trichur’s Toronto Star article, “Alliance Atlantis faces protests over buyout.” (<http://www.thestar.com/Business/article/246376>, accessed August 22, 2007)

¹³ This is a refreshing turn, and the inclusion of culture as a mitigating factor in market-based or political economy argumentations is reminiscent of Miller et al’s excellent work on Global Hollywood, where both leftist-based critics and conservative puritans are skewered.

the lens of inequity, where cultural ‘pipes’ originate within American cultural and financial institutions and flow into and through Canadian publics. This line of argumentation – the “Americanization” of cultural spaces/production in Canada – has also been rightly critiqued by Acland and others as essentialist and a dead-end investigation. As Bhabha reminds, the location of culture is a stratum in the complex inquiry into globalization, colonialism, hegemony and culture. He writes:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (Bhabha, 1994, p.2)

To find the ‘in between spaces’ concerning an inquiry into Canadian cinema, whether an attempt at defining society is embarked on or not, distribution and exhibition remain integral.

To award the merit the quandary deserves as an incredibly intricate and indispensable part of the history of Canadian film, d/e needs to be woven into every text that seeks to provide a complicated and supra-textual analysis of the country’s cinema and cinema practices. This cementing of d/e as an integral element to the ‘national discussion of culture’ is akin to Miller et al. calling for the ubiquitous element of labour to be woven into every discussion of the political economy of media, including film. (Miller et al., 2005, p.7) While those authors site the need to reference what they call the New International Division of Cultural Labour (NIDCL) at every turn possible, there is a corresponding need to include the political economy and cultural implications of d/e in serious Canadian conversations on cinema. Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell and

Wang's analysis of Hollywood in *Global Hollywood 2* is the perfect blend of political economy and cultural analysis, with very little of the 442-page tome devoted to textual analysis of cinema 'products.' The work is a striking polemic that (re)envision the political economy of production, distribution and exhibition while remaining completely devoted to a rich cultural critique of the sprawling implications of Hollywood's global reach. Indicative of this hybrid approach, they write:

The effects of screen trade are not merely registered in cultural identities, but on the very bodies and dispositions of cultural workers...Global Hollywood is an institution of global capitalism that seeks to render bodies that are intelligible and responsive to the New International Division of Cultural Labour. (Ibid, p.110)

Indeed, while distributors freely release a cinematic locust cloud of American films to the North, there is an urgent need to import Miller's approach to analyzing said actions of distributors and the context of distribution/exhibition in Canada. In other words, they go beyond a Pendakur approach to the analysis, and in fact interrogate hegemony and demand that we, as researchers and academics, see beyond the story of 'flow-through' domination in economics and/or politics.

Distribution and Exhibition and a Problematic History

It is widely held that Canada was devoid of a feature film industry until the mid-sixties, (Magder, 1993, p. xi) despite the then-twenty years of production at the NFB and six decades of distribution and exhibition by the private sector. Canada has always been an extension of the dominant trends in cinema emanating from the USA, and so it was around the same time as the neighbour to the South that the country saw its first film exhibited, and its first distribution company established. Leo-Ernest Ouimet, at the turn

of the 20th Century, was the agent responsible for both of these feats, and throughout the teens and twenties of the 1900s he and others laid the foundations for what would become the commercial cinema industry of distribution and exhibition in Canada. The Allen Brothers, Adolph Zukor, and N.L. Nathanson all established themselves as power players who collided and colluded in their efforts to harness the flow of films from the USA to Canada and turn profits from their endeavours. Their initial business dealings would eventually create Canada's Allen Theatres, Empire Theatres, Famous Players, Paramount Theatres, AMC Theatres, Odeon Theatres and Cineplex Entertainment. From the beginning, all were connected with the vertically-integrated system stemming from five of the eight big production studios located in Hollywood – the Majors – in terms of production, distribution, and exhibition. In 2006, through various acquisitions and mergers, these companies had coalesced into three multinationals in control of 85 percent of Canadian screen space: AMC, Cineplex and Empire.

The connecting tissue in most work that has looked at Canada's cinemascapes has been one framed by domination, whether described as "media imperialism and cultural dependency" (Magder, 1993, p.6), "American dominance of Canadian film screens" (Melnyck, 2004, p.6), "as Canadian as possible under the circumstances" (Dorland, 1998, ix), or the very bleak, "sadly, as good as it gets" (Beaty, 2006, p.159). Joyce Nelson dramatically concentrates the sentiment as "the story of how the Hollywood empire virtually monopolized Canada's motion picture industry...taking over production, distribution and exhibition to such an extent that this people has been literally denied its own film narrative tradition." (Nelson, 1976, p.69) Another dominant trend worth mentioning is that the authors who continue to be cited are predominantly men. Other

important works have been published by women, including the very recent *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (2007) by Zoë Druick, the highly contested *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Greirson Legend* (1998) by Joyce Nelson, and countless articles by Sandra Gathercole including “The Best Film Policy this Country Never Had.” (1978) Much of the writing on film policy that has come to dominate the discursive spaces within the Canadian academy remains authored by men, while women – such as Gathercole – have seen fairer representation in industry and popular publications.

The film industry is indeed constructed out of the clay of capitalist patriarchy, and the content of films as well as the context in which they are made and disseminated tend toward patriarchal qualities. Film theory seems to have followed suit, with the bulk of academics or “professional critics” mirroring gender inequity found throughout the industry. Sue Thornham, paraphrasing an Editorial from *Women and Film* (1972) in the introduction to *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, articulates this observation:

Women, the editors go on, are oppressed within the film industry (they are ‘receptionists, secretaries, odd job girls, prop girls’ etc.); they are oppressed by being packaged as images (sex objects, victims or vampires); and lastly they are oppressed within film theory, by male critics...It is in this climate, then, that feminist film theory begins – as an urgent political act. (Thornham, 1999, p.10)

Interestingly, neither Thornham’s introduction, nor the whole *Feminist Film Theory Reader*, address distribution and exhibition from a feminist perspective or otherwise. Feminist film theory, while articulating a much-needed stance that challenges the oppressive, patriarchal environment of cinema (both the industry and theory), mirrors the same essentialism replete throughout the academy – textual analysis is focused on at the exclusion of supra-textual considerations such as those of d/e.

As mentioned, d/e has been at the heart of Canada's cinema troubles since the first publicly held exhibitions by Ouimet in 1906. Hundreds and hundreds of Canadians assembled at the country's first movie palace – which seated 1200 – to watch films that were overwhelmingly foreign-made. (Beaty, 2006, p.151) Canada lacked the industrial and financial might of its largest trading partner, as well as the talent pool – from technicians to stars – to enter the global cinema scene as a powerful player. By the 1920s, Beaty reports:

...the Hollywood studio system [was] vertically integrated by owning both the studios that made the movies as well as the theatres in which they were seen, Canada had been all but squeezed out of its own film industry. (Ibid)

There was little in the way of domestic feature filmmaking, with a few exceptions, and in 1923 the Canadian government created the world's first government-sponsored film agency. (Ibid, p.152) The Motion Picture Bureau had as its mandate, the promotion of Canada's image in the US in order to increase trade and tourism by producing travelogue shorts. This humble beginning to state policy concerning filmmaking in Canada perhaps typifies the long running relationship concerning the culture industries of Canada and the USA, a partnership based on what Dorland – evoking Foucault – has called “governmentality” or “governmentalism,” (Foucault, 1991; Dorland, 1998, p.20; Druick, 2007, p.24) where history is seen through the seemingly continuous lens of the state. The agency, clearly not overly concerned with engendering a domestic film culture in Canada *for* Canadians, was dismantled by the late twenties after failing to keep up production standards with other national cinemas. The thirties saw Canada's colonizer, Britain introduce protectionist measures against the Hollywood barrage by introducing screen quotas for UK theatres. One result of this policy was American filmmakers seized on the

opportunity to make “quota quickies” – low budget films made by Americans in Canada and quickly sent off to the UK, (Dorland, 1998, p.66) and by the end of the thirties the loophole was closed, and the fragmented foundations for some kind of film (production) industry were left in Canada.

In March 1939, the National Film Board of Canada was created with the legendary John Grierson at the helm, an expert in the “psychology of propaganda” (NFB site, 2007). The NFB’s arrival brought the prolific production of documentary shorts, and with the drums of war beating steady, government and industry struck a deal to show newsreel-style NFB films across the country in Famous Players’ 800 theatres. (Beaty, 2006, p.153) The films were also distributed by the NFB to the USA and around the world, placing Canada on the international cinema map for the first time. However, once the war was over, Beaty reports that “Famous Players cancelled their agreement to show Canadian films, and distribution reverted to its previous dire state.” (Ibid) Canada was not the urbanized nation it is today, and rural communities were often excluded from distribution and exhibition of NFB documentary shorts, even during the agreement with Famous Players.

In what might be the first institutionalized-grassroots-hybrid response to the d/e problem in Canada – albeit culturally limited by the fact that it was a government initiative – the NFB established *film circuits*, where technicians would travel to rural communities with projectors, screens and NFB shorts and set up public exhibitions in schools, churches, libraries, and especially union halls. Independent film councils grew out of these circuits, with men and women from a wide range of social standings taking part in screenings and the lively discussions that followed. In 1943, the NFB established

the urban counterpart to the film circuits, the Volunteer Projection Service. The NFB reports that by 1945, “Voluntary film councils started to replace the travelling film circuits” and “by 1946 there were 150 councils, and by 1955, 496.” (NFB site, 2007) Film reels were distributed to these volunteer associations through 600-plus libraries across the country. (Ibid) In this same period the government of Canada tried to even the odds for Canadian cinema by entering into the Canadian Co-operation Project in 1948. However, as Beaty aptly puts it: “This policy presented the Canadian film market to the American companies on a silver platter.” (Beaty, 2006, p.153) On the surface, the agreement was to boost Canadian production, but as Dorland argues, “in its final form, it was designed to help conservation of dollar exchange in Canada...” (Dorland, 1998, p.67)

Around the same time, the Massey Report emerged from Ottawa and identified the “alien threat” of America on Canada’s cinema, never really identifying d/e spaces as areas of focus or targets of such threats, however. The report is an important historical document as it is one of the first formal, published positions of concern for the commercialization of culture in Canada, (Dorland, 1998, p.15) a concern that resonates today, including in this thesis, especially in terms of discussing commercially-oriented and community-oriented d/e spaces. Lastly, the Massey Report writers put faith in the NFB to save cinema in the country, too much faith in retrospect, but ultimately legitimized documentary as a viable genre capable of intervention against such foreign threats, or as Ted Magder puts it, “Canadian documentaries alone would have to stem the Hollywood menace.” (quoted in Dorland, 1998, p.15)

Despite strong committee rhetoric warning the government of American imperialism (cultural hegemony), Hollywood has continued throughout the decades to talk its way out of trade restrictions against the unrestricted flow of American films through studio owned or controlled distribution and exhibition networks in Canada. At various junctions government-sponsored reports flagged the problem of d/e and called for strong interventions. Two important articulations of this position are highlighted by Dorland in his text on Canadian film policy: *The Interdepartmental Committee on the Possible Development of Feature Film Production in Canada, 1964-5* and *The Committee's Studies of Canadian Feature Film Production and Distribution* (1965). What is particularly telling is the word "Possible" in the title of the first committee's moniker – by 1964, after five decades of film production of one kind or another in the country, the government was sober enough in its judgment to realize a viable domestic production industry was still not a reality.

Apart from government-led advancements into understanding the problem of Canada's film industry, the 1960s and 1970s also saw the beginning of organized advocacy for independent film, Canadian content, and documentary cinema in Canada. One of the earliest groups to organize around independent cinema and distribution maintains a strong position to this day. The Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre (CFMDC) was started in 1967 "by a group of visionary filmmakers with the set goal of increasing distribution opportunities, audiences and visibility for artists and independent film." (CFMDC site) The CFMDC provides alternative distribution possibilities for independent film and documentary cinema, as well as a central location in Toronto that houses a robust library of archived Canadian works. As they put it: "The CFMDC is

artist-driven and dedicates itself to distributing films which operate not simply outside of the mainstream, but which are innovative and diverse in their origins and expressions.” (Ibid)

Other documentary and independent cinema advocates and activists coalesced into various formations throughout the seventies, much of the action culminating in the filmmaking hub of Toronto. *Cinema Canada* was started in 1972 as a magazine to promote and support Canadian independent film and filmmakers. While the magazine folded in 1988, the people involved with the project stayed involved in advocacy, together with filmmakers and those at the Canadian Independent Film Caucus, created in 1983 to “lobby the newly created Telefilm Canada on behalf of independent, point-of-view documentary filmmakers.” (Wise, 2004) In 1972 *Cinema Canada* contributor Sandra Gathercole launched “one of the first major shots in the battles fought [for docs and independent film]” (Personal Interview, Cox, 2007) in 1972 on July 4th, with a brief to Minister Pelletier, signed by 1001 prominent Canadian filmmakers, and on behalf of the Toronto Film Coop, the CFMDC and the umbrella organization, Council of Canadian Filmmakers (for which Gathercole was chairperson for several years). The climate of confrontation with both American cinema industry and the Canadian State against these activists and advocates during this period is perhaps summed up in Gathercole’s polemic: “Canadian movie houses were built to show American movies and have remained a territorial monopoly for American distributors.” (Gathercole, 1978) In the same *Cinema Canada* article she describes the Canadian government’s record for negotiations with the Americans as a “joke.” (Ibid)

Eventually the Caucus became the Documentary Organization of Canada¹⁴ with chapters developed across the country. DOC “is a national non-profit professional and advocacy organization dedicated to supporting the art of independent documentary filmmaking and filmmakers in Canada.” (www.docorg.ca) The organization has been active for the last three decades in lobbying the government on behalf of documentary, but much like the academics writing on cinema in Canada, members have focused on production, until recent years, where efforts are shifting toward challenging the pigeon-holing of documentary into television broadcast, arguing for feature-length documentaries to be supported for wide distribution and theatrical exhibition.

Other percolations in the activism/advocacy area emerged through the NFB’s *Challenge for Change* program, a nexus for politically-minded filmmakers and documentary supporters, (more on the program follows in the chapter). *Société Nouvelle*, the Francophone version of *Challenge for Change*, was celebrated for the creation of *Vidéographe*, which opened its doors on St. Denis in 1971 and became the physical space for grassroots distribution and exhibition of social-justice documentaries in Quebec for the decades to follow. From Fondation-Langlois: “Vidéographe’s original mandate was to investigate three hypotheses: citizens have something to say; video can give them the means; and there is a public for video.” (2) Vidéographe began to set up production and distribution programs and to present screenings of its own productions. Currently, Vidéographe has three main departments that continue to promote these original principles.”¹⁵ This offshoot of Challenge for Change epitomizes the type of grassroots d/e

¹⁴ In the spirit of disclosure, the author of this thesis sits on the Executive Board of the Documentary Organization of Canada – Quebec chapter.

¹⁵ From: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=258>, accessed July 10th, 2007

spaces and practices that this thesis interrogates. From the “distribution” section of the *Vidéographe* website: “Avec un catalogue de plus de 1400 titres, des artistes de renommée nationale et internationale, une ouverture aux jeunes auteurs, Vidéographe s'affiche comme l'un des distributeurs indépendants les plus dynamiques au Canada.” (www.videographe.qc.ca) Other independent sites for film and video d/e cropped up elsewhere in Canada over the years, including the well-respected *Video In*, “a not for profit video production, exhibition and distribution centre,” (www.videoinstudios.com) located in Vancouver, BC, and started in 1973 with the founding of the Satellite Video Exchange Society (SVES). *Video In* distributes films, organizes screenings, workshops, festivals and other social events around art cinema, but does not specialise in documentary. Located also in Vancouver is the “largest distributor of Canadian independent film and video in Western Canada,” (<http://www.movingimages.ca>) a grassroots organization called *Moving Images Distribution*, started in 1979. Similar articulations of community-oriented video/media centres and grassroots d/e spaces exist in Canada, including *Video Pool* in Winnipeg (www.videopool.org) and *Open Space* in Victoria (<http://openspace.ca/web/>). As well, scores of grassroots and corporate film festivals and series dot the Canadian mediascape, too many to mention. Perhaps the most recent incarnation to emerge in the line of defense of independent Canadian documentary is the *Observatoire du documentaire/Documentary Network*, founded on June 30, 2003, as a connective body for various organizations such as DOC, Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (RIDM) (the second largest documentary festival in Canada, begun in 1997), and the NFB.

After a spur of activity around documentary advocacy in the seventies, the Canadian government created more programs and directives that continued to narrowly focus on production, including the Canadian Film Development Corporation (1967) which became Telefilm Canada (1984), the Canadian Non-Theatrical Film and Video Fund (1988), The Feature Film Fund (1988), The Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund (1991) and more. The government did create the Feature Film Distribution Fund (1988), making credit lines available to filmmakers in order to find ways of distributing their works, but it was but one modest initiative aimed at distribution in a long line of production-oriented programs and bodies.

For years the Canadian government has been criticized for focusing funding spread sheets and roundtable summits on production aspects of domestic filmmaking, including documentary, with little to no consideration paid to distribution and exhibition of Canadian films, especially independent productions, where one usually finds documentaries. Both Dorland and Acland have reinvigorated theorizing Canadian film policy and while the two scholars have arrived at somewhat different conclusions, they both point to a definitive problem space concerning Canadian cinema policy that I would argue is at the heart of ‘the problem’ of Canadian cinema practices, including documentary and grassroots cinema. Dorland calls it a “complex heterogeneity” and therefore there exists a difficulty with locating its nucleus (1998), Acland talks about a propensity toward an “expo-mentality” with non-commercial cinema, where there is a tendency toward specialized venues. (2003) Both authors point to a difficulty in moving past discussions around a national cinema, and posit a greater understanding of discursive

formations (in Dorland's case) or a certain habitus (in Acland's case), as they borrow from Foucault and Bourdieu, respectively.

Writing about cinema practices in Canada is complicated given the complex tapestry of relationships one has to consider. Studying distribution and exhibition practices is no exception, and it is essential to study a wider "area of play" as Bourdieu would put it. (1999) As Raymond Williams's work on "structure of feeling" reminds us, to even begin to understand one cultural formation or articulation one needs to examine the terrain, or field – the interconnected and malleable map of thinking and actions that make up the context in which the object of study is 'located.' Locating cultural practices is never bound by rigid sets of determinates, or even plausibility as Dorland reminds. He argues that locating Canadian cinema has been the driving problem in studies and academic work on the subject, and calls for works that recognize the complexity, multiplicity, the "heterogeneity" of Canadian cinema policy and practices. (Dorland, 1998, p.XX) To this end, it is important to understand state policy, social climate, and the politics of post-war Canada, and especially the sprawling psychic and physical 'location' the National Film Board of Canada has occupied in Canada's (documentary) mediascape. The culmination of Canada's State film production and distribution house back in May 1939, was a monumental juncture in the country's cultural policy history. The Board has always been a cultural institution engaged in defining Canada through documentary film, or as the title of Zoë Druick's new work posits, the NFB has been and is concerned with "Projecting Canada." (2007) As a state agency pulled between bureaucracy, the public, artists and the (corporate, mostly American) market, it has rarely enjoyed a smooth and

celebratory tenure, but has miraculously survived as one of the world's leading production facilities for documentary cinema.

Throughout the forties and fifties the NFB continued producing films, but the emphasis shifted from an externalized, nation-building through war that Zoë Druick calls internationalism, (2006) to an internalized, self-referential nation building most would now call benevolent nationalism or civic federalism. With a robust staff of nearly 1,000 the institution continued to produce, distribute, and exhibit films from coast to coast to coast. An invigorated and well-funded crown corporation with a new mandate of connecting the country, was at some level linking Canadians through travelling film screenings and film circuits (mentioned earlier), showing mainly educational works within schools, and advocacy films for labour movements.

By the 1950s television had arrived in Canada and many of the grassroots-style distribution methods for disseminating NFB productions would soon wane as Canadians increasingly stayed home to watch their new sets. George Melnyck reports that by the early 1960s, "television had completed its domination of film," (Melnick, 2004, p.101) and offers the following statistics: "in 1963 there were only 88 million tickets sold in film theatres, compared with 247 million in 1952, when television first came to Canada." (Ibid) As American programming poured into the nation's living rooms and onto the new theatrical screens across the country, signs of the future audience seemed bleak at best, and the NFB poured resources into distribution initiatives. At one point in the 1950s the Board was spending nearly as much on distribution as production in an effort to bridge the gap between the produced and the seen. By the time the late sixties arrived the NFB had reinvented itself several times and undergone public attacks and charges of

irrelevancy. The social movements setting Canadian soil on fire in 1968 brought a new influence onto the beleaguered but surviving cultural institution, and the *Challenge for Change* program was born.

Case in Point: Challenge for Change

Challenge for Change (CFC) and its Francophone counterpart, *Société Nouvelle* is one of the most studied, researched, and written about media initiatives in Canada's history. The program was groundbreaking in its attempt by a government to work with artists in order to address important social issues of the day (poverty at the top of the list), and judging by the references, the articles, and the volume of literature in general, CFC remains relevant to this day. A new group of committed filmmakers, that is, committed to progressive social transformation (Waugh, 1980, p.10) is even starting a 2007 resurrection of the initiative. CFC provides an excellent historical site for research on d/e, and sifting through the prolific documentation on the documentary project and connecting it with larger discursive formations, cultural trends and policy trajectories around documentary practices in Canada serves to enrich an understanding of d/e history. It is a junction of many unlikely components that continue to intersect and formulate the ways in which the cinema of Canada is imagined, practiced and theorized.

I have two reasons for focusing in on this internationally imitated initiative in this chapter: (1) *Challenge for Change* was and remains seeped in the rhetoric of media democracy, participatory media, and media as a tool for social transformation – all elements of a discursive formation around democracy and cultural participation; (2) the project is almost exclusively studied for its production aspects, and little scholastic work

has looked at the ways in which *Challenge for Change* distributed and exhibited the works produced during its tenure – indicative of a larger discursive problem space identified earlier in this thesis.

Challenge for Change is also part of a larger socio-political and cultural phenomenon many have referred to as the “media democracy movement,” (Hackett 2000; Kidd 2003) and the spaces the initiative created (and given new books, conferences and groups, I would argue, continues to create) are invaluable as academics and activists alike continue to struggle for similar goals in connection with advancing democratic ideals through media research, production, dissemination and participation. Grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema in Canada is one such space. This aspect of CFC has been less researched and perhaps evidence of these practices around the program is more nuanced in the available historical documents, but is nevertheless central to the tenets, the goals, and the practices of the CFC project.

Challenge for Change is an illuminating historical moment to revisit: from first hand accounts to reportage to government documentation, writing on the program does not exclude extra-production practices around the documentary filmmaking and dissemination that was the central tenet of CFC, but instead incorporates and even highlights such practices without overtly naming them *distribution* and *exhibition*. In 1991, Dorothy Todd Hénaut compiled several pages of reflection on her involvement in the program entitled “Video Stories from the Dawn of Time.” This document is an excellent example of thick description of the *Challenge for Change* program and includes details on distribution and exhibition. Hénaut chooses several of the initiative’s film projects and describes how the films were constructed and produced, how they were used

in communities for citizen's action meetings around important issues, how the films were used to provoke and ease dialogue between groups, and how they were used to advance a community's struggle by articulating the struggle through film and discussion to other external groups such as government officials, corporate management or a neighbouring community.

Films were indeed transported around the country, shown at band halls on reserves, union halls, special clubs, schools, churches, parks, private homes, and other community locations. Woven throughout the success stories of working with the poor, disenfranchised, the marginalized, and others, there is the connection to the larger ideas around mass media, participation and democracy. Hénault writes that "Mass media [is] still closed to citizens," and that "Ordinary citizens have a great deal of difficulty in getting their opinions expressed in the information media." (Hénault 1991) By identifying this problem of access, she taps into the root of the *Challenge for Change* experiment, and it is no coincidence that *Access* was the name given to the program's newsletter. *Access* implies opening up production and process, and including a diverse range of individuals in not just the process of making a documentary film, but in how that film is shared, screened, and used as well. Indeed, the program is even credited with launching the conceptual framework for "public access" in media. (Higgins, 1999, p.625)

Writing about the launch of the *Challenge for Change* project for an Australian publication in 1968, Barbara Taylor reports: "It was an exciting year. Three projects were launched to explore the possibilities of giving citizens great direct access to media." (Taylor, 1973) It is during the sixties that discourse around mass media, access and participation began to gain momentum and dovetail with existing social movements and

organizations interested in social justice and most of all social transformation, with social inclusion in media making comprising the first step. This is apparent in the initial stages of *Challenge for Change* articulated by none other than the Government Film Commissioner at the time, Hugo McPherson: "...the objective must be social change, not a rationalization of things as they are.... participation in film activities can generate group action." (*Access*, vol. 2, 1968, p.3) These early positions around democratic participation in media making were part of a larger discourse around civil disobedience and political action, or as Patricia Zimmermann calls them, "zones of contestation, insurgency and community." (2000, p.35) While these zones were being battled over in the streets, some were busy locating the tools with which they could communicate and distribute important stories.

Challenge for Change was an attempt to reify many implications for alternative media practices, and in doing so addressed the fundamental tensions between democracy and technology, government and artists, state and citizen, representation and participation, and finally, advocacy and spectacle. As a state program, CFC was embedded in government hierarchy, bureaucracy, political process and public scrutiny (when the public was aware, that is). As a government initiative, funding and therefore resources were controlled by one gatekeeper: the state. This included the monies and means for which the many documentaries could be circulated across the country and shown to disparate audiences, as well as the facilitation of film delivery to groups using the texts as tools in campaigns and for advocacy in general. Recorded experiences show that the CFC filmmakers often express lament for this hierarchal relationship, as many do to this day when making media with the state, but the level of control over dissemination

for CFC works was remarkably relaxed and unorthodox for a government program of its kind, or any government program for that matter.¹⁶

Perhaps the best film to come out of the *CFC* program, one that typifies the alternative methods for not just production, but distribution and exhibition as well, is the 36-minute *You are on Indian Land*, made in 1969. A film made with both First Nations and non-aboriginal crew members, it documents a Mohawk protest over land and border duties in Ontario. In a recent interview I conducted with Mike Mitchell – who initiated the film and whom director Mort Ransen bestows creative credit to as well – he describes the process of getting the film circulated and screened. He says that in keeping with the *CFC* objective to make films *with* communities not merely *about* them, a rough cut was immediately assembled and Mitchell set out with two 16mm reels to the community where the conflict was still present.

Mitchell, who has just retired as Grand Chief of Akwesasne, says he toured with the film between Canada and the USA, speaking at over 100 screenings in six months. “Universities would pay to have me come and discuss the issues raised in the film. You have to understand, that at the time, First Nations issues were not on the map in North America, so it was a big deal.” (Personal Interview, Mitchell, 2007) Mitchell maintains that the ways that *CFC* films were circulated and exhibited were as grassroots and community-serving as were the way they were produced. He travelled all over the continent, visiting First Nations reserves, community centres, schools, and “even prisons” (Ibid). Mitchell says that it was crucial to “really push the the ... theme of *CFC*” by leading discussions, creating dialogue, and generating a buzz around the film so that local

¹⁶ That being said, the Challenge for Change programme was infamous for suppressing project that were seen to be sympathetic to the Quebec separatist movement.

media would cover the grassroots screenings, and in turn, the larger issues of First Nations rights, wherever the grassroots screenings took place.

You are on Indian Land was not shown in Canadian commercial cinema houses. It was shown over a dozen times in the community it documented, at town meetings, and at special screenings for the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) as well as government bureaucrats. Mitchell says that “using media as a tool is the greatest lesson I’ve learned from that experience” (Ibid) and that thanks to “buzz” created by the initial grassroots circulation and community-oriented exhibitions, it achieved major goals set out by the CFC initiative, and more. He says that the initial grassroots efforts “amounted to many points of discussion, focus meetings, and it was a prelude to the wider distribution – it created interest in the film.” (Ibid)

Mitchell credits the grassroots movement and sharing of the film as “bridging a communication gap” between different groups, including the First Nations protesters and the OPP. “I believe that it was because of these screenings that all the charges were dropped,” and “it was a catalyst on many fronts.” (Ibid) He says that the film’s circulation throughout North America at Universities and other community locations, led to international interest – “We got interest worldwide, it was the first time First Nations issues began to surface, it helped put the pressure on Canada.” (Ibid)

You are on Indian Land was a watershed film that epitomized the essence of the CFC experiment and illustrates the power of grassroots d/e practices and spaces to shift power imbalances. By “bridging the gap” and facilitating dialogue, Mitchell says that police treated future protesters differently, and First Nations rights were hurtled to the top of government focus, while the Canadian public began an education – through the vehicle

of documentary – on the oppression of First Nations, and their communities’ response and resistance. Mitchell can’t overstate the importance of those community screenings and discussions and says that “if we didn’t have a film medium to bridge communication it could have led to violent confrontation...” (Ibid) As well, the grassroots activities around the film have inspired decades of dialogue and debate. Mitchell comments: “Even today people still talk about it ... The issue doesn’t die, it gets discussed still...” (Ibid) The same can be said of the incredible program that *You are on Indian Land* was born out of.

Challenge for Change approached the percolating social issues of the sixties including disaffected youth, urbanization, unemployment, poverty, discrimination and health, with an alternative government program designed to radically alter the more traditional or formalized relationship between filmmaker, policy maker and community member respectively. The role of filmmaker became that of participant in the communities, in the issues that she or he sought to document, as well as an involvement in the dissemination of what it was that was being articulated through documentary cinema and through each project itself. The idea of *circulation* was central to the ideals and goals of the program, and while figures show not enough money was dedicated to distribution per say, the grassroots practices around using documentary films as advocate, catalyst or educator were central to every memo, meeting, document, discussion and debate relating to those involved in the program.

This lends support to the proposition that the problem of Canada’s film industry and especially Canada’s world-renowned documentary cinema, isn’t a lack of content, policy, opinion, attention, research, or discursive space: it is a lack of a coherent position

and agreement on the invaluable place of distribution and exhibition of domestic media. *Challenge for Change* was a program that implicated this, and showed the importance of documentary practices beyond production, and in doing so, revealed how media could be harnessed to advance progressive goals around the democratization of media and the participation of citizens in creating media, sharing media, and imagining and articulating community with the use of media as an agent for social change. In short, what *CFC* (at least partly) produced was counternarratives with its films and counterpublics with the practices around d/e.

George Stoney, the Executive Producer of the program, said of the complex relationship between government, artist and the larger community in a Winter 1968-69 *CFC* Newsletter: "...if a program entitled 'Challenge for Change' is to be more than a public relations gimmick to make The Establishment seem more in tune with the times, we can't be too concerned with peace of mind." Indeed, these are strong words from someone whose paycheques were stamped with the seal of the Canadian government. This tension is at the heart of *Challenge for Change*, and at the heart of a multiplicity of grassroots cultural practices that define Canada's diverse mediascape, where power of resources is negotiated with power of voice or representation. Understanding these spaces where media is produced and disseminated in order to build strong communities and contribute to a democratic public sphere requires the understanding of past attempts to achieve social transformation by way of proactive policy. There are many examples of the use of documentary film toward such ends, but few come close to capturing the breadth, the international acclaim, and the radical collaboration between state bureaucrats, artists, and community activists as *Challenge for Change*. As a media

scholar concerned with progressive social change, re-imagining the spaces media and community can inhabit within Canada's physical and psychic borders is impossible without visiting the spaces created by *CFC*. And in the new technobabble rhetoric of multi-platform delivery systems, digital downloads and hyper-consumerism, one mustn't forget the central tenet of a program ambitiously created to bridge the gap between government and governed, between the haves and the have-nots, the well-positioned and the marginalized.

CHAPTER IV

PROTESTS, RAVES, VIRAL MARKETING AND THE BOX OFFICE: CONVERSATION/RESEARCH SPACES

The evolving dynamics of cultural production, dissemination, viewing, and consumption will largely determine the shape of cultural participation to come. From a public policy perspective, it is imperative that we have an informed understanding of the risks, tendencies, and trends of cultural participation and consumption in order to act strategically in the public interest of Canadians. From a research perspective, we need to keep the audience or participating population at the centre of theoretical cultural analysis, in order to enhance our understanding of the motivations and patterns underlying the scope and duration of such cultural participation and consumption.

(John A. Foote, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2002)

I have also attempted to locate documentary in a new relationship to social science, at the heart of the epistemological debates of the twentieth century...Documentary form is not simply a reaction to previous documentary theory; it is also a response to shifts in theories of knowledge more generally. In its relation to social science, documentary is a discourse subject to objectives and truth claims that transcend film.

(Zoë Druick, 2007, p.182)

By now most scholars and dutiful readers of cinema and communication studies know the old story: Canada's cinema is under the oppressive thumb of multinational studio conglomerates working out of Hollywood. So where to go from this position when conducting investigations into the sordid spaces of documentary and grassroots d/e in Canada? Some advocate for an "affirmative-based" rather than "defensive-based" response to problems that have been identified in this thesis's previous pages.¹⁷ It is true that there is much literature by Canadian scholars that point to problems with Canada's

¹⁷ This comment is based on unpublished correspondence between myself and communication scholar Ira Wagman, May, 2007.

film industry, while texts that begin from an affirmative position are fewer, and indeed they may be correct in surmising that this positioning around the issues may actually contribute to the problems many texts seek to resolve.

George Melnyck considers film studies scholars “intermediaries between film and its audience” but sees this role not as interventionist, but rather reflective, as “after-the-fact intermediaries” when compared to lawyers, bureaucrats, funders, distributors, etc. (Melnick, 2004, p.245) This proclamation effectively renders scholars of Canadian film and film policy passive interlocutors, rather than active participants with an assertive stance capable of contributing to change. In this chapter I describe initiatives that are building alternatives to Canada’s commercial cinema distribution and exhibition industry in an attempt to address a larger discursive problem space that I have discussed in the previous chapters. By investigating Canadian sites of grassroots d/e, an argumentation that not only identifies problems, but also asserts a positive position for solutions may be granted the space to develop. The sites visited here present real challenges to hegemony, that is to say, real grassroots alternatives that are oriented around community spaces and practices that build counterpublics and play important roles in the building of democratic spaces that often run counter to dominant (cinematic) cultural flows and “common sense” (Peet, 2002, p.56) tendencies in Canadian society.

I will begin by positioning myself within this field of inquiry with a description of *Cinema Politica* – an international network of distribution and exhibition of political cinema predominantly operating in Canada – which I founded, organize and continue to curate. I will discuss other community-oriented sites that can be seen as responsive constructions of media dissemination and community-building in a climate of rampant

commercial media consolidation. Among such sites I will focus on Film Circuit – a Public Private Partnership (PPP) initiative that combines grassroots principles and commercial moviegoing spaces to respond to the lack of diversity in cinemas in towns across Canada. To facilitate the discussion in this chapter I will be drawing on several interviews that I have conducted, including those with filmmakers, theatre managers, distributors, marketers and organizers.

My research falls into two categories, an extensive literature review (including commissioned and non-commissioned reports), and field research. Much of the literature that I harness is theoretical in nature, and has often not been directly connected to documentary and/or distribution and exhibition. With foundational theory covered in Chapter III, source material here is mainly comprised of trade publications and government and organizational reports. To compliment and illustrate comments made by my informants, I employ texts from recent government and advocacy reports and papers, from trade/industry analyses to a report on mapping the social qualities from documentary cinema, entitled *Breaking New Ground*. As well, there is commercially-produced documentation that offers further evidence to support statements made by informants. Finally, I spend the initial pages of Chapter IV mapping out my own experience and involvement within the field of documentary cinema and grassroots distribution and exhibition.

Positioning the Author in the Field in Focus

I started Cinema Politica in 2001, while I was an undergraduate student at Langara College in Vancouver, BC. It is a grassroots cinema project now under the umbrella of

Montreal-based non-profit überculture, and comprises a network of several local film exhibition sites across Canada, Europe and the USA. The Canadian component of the network has nearly 20 locals, most of which are located on college and university campuses. überculture is committed to challenging and resisting the corporatization of culture and Cinema Politica is a project that creates pluralistic and inclusive democratic spaces on campuses, where admission to political film screenings is always by donation and everyone is welcome to participate in discussions that occur after each exhibition. While I maintain a position as principal organizer for the project there is a collective governance structure in place, and activities occur due to the collaboration of committed organizers within überculture as well as a Board of Directors specifically created for the project. As well, many of the grassroots activities and efforts associated with the project have been orchestrated by way of strategic collaborations with filmmakers, other organizations, student groups and individuals.

Cinema Politica's main objective is to disseminate, exhibit and promote political cinema by independent artists, with an emphasis on Canadian works and documentaries (over 90 per cent are docs). All pieces that are screened are political works; they represent cinema texts that engage an audience on important socio-political, cultural, environmental and economic issues that are particularly provocative in challenging dominant ideologies and accepted norms. Exhibited works are innovative and seek to educate, entertain and especially inspire audiences to participate in openly democratic practices. Emphasis is placed on works that tell stories underrepresented by mainstream media, including narratives around minority struggles within Canada, or gender and sexual identity for example. The position of the artist in society is taken into account in

the curatorial process, with a focus on artists who are marginalized and/or struggle with oppression.

Cinema Politica is a project rooted in the belief that diversity and plurality in culture, media and the arts builds stronger publics and leads to increased democratic practices by engendering social inclusion and participation while educating audiences. Screenings are typically held bi-monthly or weekly in auditoriums at various universities and colleges across Canada. Each group organizing screenings is either formed around Cinema Politica, or has another, pre-existing mandate such as social justice or media education. Groups draw from a vast screening pool of nearly 200 titles that is added to each year through a curatorial process centralized in Montreal and programmed by myself. Groups choose films from this pool, then choose how often to have screenings and whether to bring speakers. Local organizers are encouraged to follow the mandate of the series by using the films as discussion springboards and by using campus space for political debate and the sharing of knowledge and experience. With proper funding, there will be a web-based communication system developed for all the local organizers to communicate and share the experience of facilitating screenings and discussions around different issues in their respective communities.

Cinema Politica was started at Langara College in 2001 after I grew frustrated with the lack of diversity in Vancouver's larger commercial theatres and after the city's smaller, independent theatres slowly began shutting down. At the college there were no public screenings except for classroom projections. The series was started as a direct response and intervention to the homogeneity of product found in the local commercial

cinemas, where managers and programmers continue to focus – or are forced to focus by corporate headquarters management - on blockbusters and large US studio releases.

Cinema Politica has grown in the traditional way grassroots projects and networks grow, by word of mouth. There has been little marketing of the initiative, and instead “buzz” from the tremendous success of the flagship series at Concordia has spread across Canada and start-up locals have even popped up in the US, France, Romania and Peru. Where commercially-oriented industry parlance speaks of marketing, grassroots d/e is all about “buzz” or what Katherine Dodds calls “viral marketing.” (Personal Interview, Dodds, 2007, p.2) The entire initiative is non-profit and is accessible to every member of each community where one finds a local. Admission is free of charge, and as universities are (so far) public institutions, everyone from the public is welcome, not just students. At Concordia’s weekly screenings there is a committed and loyal group of homeless, and/or low income individuals who attend screenings, which has often resulted in clashes with university security. This kind of accessibility and inclusiveness can only be achieved in a community-oriented project that is not located in a commercially defined and dictated environment like a megaplex, or mainstream cinemahouse where the first hurdle is money and the second is appearance.

As with the discussion of counterhegemony and counterpublics in chapter II, Cinema Politica spaces are constructed around principles of diversity and dissent, power shifting and community building. They are simultaneously “disruptions to dominant power” (Rennie, 2006, p.19) and articulations of collective identities in the way of community. An example of the community-orientation of the screenings can be seen with the screenings that have occurred in Montreal around Kevin Pina’s documentaries on

Haiti. In each of the three screenings over the last three years the director has come to facilitate a discussion and often very emotional debate with an audience of 400 to 500 Haitians and Hatian-Canadians. For these screenings, as with other screenings, Cinema Politica organizers have collaborated with groups that share interest in the issues presented in the film. For the Haiti screenings, Cinema Politica worked with Haiti Action Montreal to disseminate information to the Montreal Haitian community that each screening was to occur, resulting in an overwhelming turnout of members of a scattered, diaspora, to share thoughts and opinions on the culture and home they have left behind. I now turn to the handful of interviews and insights that have percolated throughout my experience of researching this thesis in the next subsection

Findings

Cinema Politica

The grassroots d/e spaces created within the Cinema Politica Network fit into Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism, where difference is debated constructively after screenings, and where community is articulated free of pressure to agree, but is also where "the political" is exercised by individuals who construct and express identity, either as individuals or as collectives.

An example of such a space for pluralism, where Cinema Politica has engendered cultural participation and contributed to democratic processes, is illustrated by screening held at Concordia in 2006. The event was a special premiere screening of Kevin Pina's *Haiti: Harvest of Hope* (2006) with the director present for an introduction to the film and to participate in a discussion with the audience afterward. Pina was the last Western

journalist still stationed in Haiti, and after having his life threatened several times, and documenting the atrocities being committed on the ground, he flew to Montreal, smuggling the film with him. At Concordia, about 500 people had arrived, the vast majority of whom were from the Haitian community in Montreal – a community deeply divided along political lines concerning the government of Haiti and the international intervention in the country. Pina's film screened, a brutally graphic film portraying grisly violence against citizens of the country and conveying the deepest emotions from subjects in the documentary. During the screening many members of the audience were heard loudly wailing, which is customary in Haitian culture, expressing sorrow and solidarity for the members of their community depicted in the film. After the screening the room erupted into debate and discussion, in French, Creole and English, with the many, diverse opinions of the community articulated emotionally in a space where they clearly felt comfortable and encouraged to do so. The film had acted like a platform from which the discussion sprung forth, and Pina at one point "stepped back" while members of the audience stood up in their seats and addressed one another. It was an emotionally charged evening, one that shocked some non-Haitians (as told to me in confidence by some audience members) but ultimately bridged understanding between the different factions of the Haitian community in Montreal, and non-Haitian audience members. It was participatory, plural, and a rupture within a (largely removed) community that reconnected with the community members from their homeland, as depicted on screen.

Cinema Politica, as grassroots d/e spaces and practices, provides refuge from mainstream, commercially-oriented sites of cinema consumption, and contributes to the building of counterpublics through participation, inclusion and provocation. Ultimately,

Cinema Politica is an opportunity to build a sense of place. Susan G. Davis writes that “...location-based entertainment projects face a central and perhaps paradoxical problem. Inserted into standardized and relentlessly exploited commercial spaces, they must create – out of thin air – a sense of place.” (1999, p.445) Cinema Politica, unlike many other cinema projects (including some grassroots examples like Film Circuit) has concentrated on the physical locations of universities and colleges, encouraging the “reclaiming” of campus space from corporations who continue to corporatize Canada’s education institutions. (Turk, ed., 2000) It is also a “public” space, where campus community and other groups are somewhat more free from the negotiations of completely commercial spaces, such as the megaplex. Davis continues: “The key theme park lessons applied to retail-entertainment are, first, shape and manage spaces to appeal to the most economically desirable customers, making sure to exclude the *undesirables* through price, marketing or explicit policy.” (italics added) (Ibid) While this commentary is targeted at larger entertainment spaces such as theme parks and “entertainment cities” (Ibid) Davis connects to the commercially-oriented cinema spaces as gatekeepers “managing” the flow of audience. Cinema Politica, and other grassroots d/e projects are anathema to this philosophy of exclusion and maximizing economic potential. As illustrated, Cinema Politica screenings offer a chance to see alternative media, and more importantly, to participate in cultural exchange and to build organic, inclusive, and community-oriented spaces. This is not a new concept, as will be shown in the next historical example of such grassroots, counterpublic spaces.

You are on Indian Land and Mike Mitchell

The voice on the phone pauses, and in an assertive tone imparts words that ultimately lend support to my own assumptions about grassroots efforts to disseminate and show documentary film and video: “The initial distribution and community screenings of the film amounted to many points of discussion, focus meetings, and was a prelude to the wider distribution – the early efforts created interest in the film.” (Personal Interview, 2007) Mike Mitchell, speaking from his home in Akwesasne, Quebec, tells me that in 1969, immediately following the rough cut release of *You are on Indian Land* (dir., Mort Ransen), he packed up the reels and toured both Canada and the USA, leading post-screening discussions at over 100 locations in just under six months. (Ibid)

Despite many attempts to concretize and quantify the real effectivity of documentary production, distribution and exhibition – including the recent study by the Erin Research Group titled *Breaking New Ground* (2005) – social science efforts to connect cinema with community and social change are as fluid and multifaceted as the documentary practices themselves. First hand perspectives, extracted through interviews, *can* provide descriptive analysis of these connections, and in the case of Mitchell and *You are on Indian Land* he remains adamant that the early, grassroots practices around disseminating and projecting the film (on 16mm) had a causal relationship with the film’s larger international distribution, later, spearheaded by the National Film Board, as well as the socio-political and cultural effects that the documentary had on aboriginal communities and the larger public.

Indeed, *You are on Indian Land* exemplifies the use of d/e of documentary film to challenge power – in this case the Canadian State – by an oppressed group, with the

results articulating a series of actions that could be described as counterhegemonic. When Mitchell tells of visiting scores of “universities, town-halls, union workplaces, reservations, and schools” on his inaugural tour with the film, he is describing the construction of counterpublic spaces with a counternarrative text that was ultimately used to instigate and engage Mouffe’s vision of agonistic pluralism. This latter consideration is pronounced by the fact that the film was screened with the Ontario Provincial Police – who are shown in the documentary forcefully handling aboriginal protesters – a group representing the oppressive power of the state and whom Mitchell and compatriots were at complete odds with. What resulted from these grassroots screenings with stakeholders and involved groups? Mitchell says “it really effected how police interacted with protesters and how they conducted themselves at future demonstrations and other actions.” (Ibid) Moreover, Mitchell says that the circulation of the film meant “it was the first time First Nations issues surfaced” and “it helped put the pressure on Canada.” (Ibid) Clearly, Mitchell’s perspective is that the grassroots d/e of the *You are on Indian Land* documentary resulted in concrete and important change and constitutes what I refer to in Chapter II (p.10) as a site of resistance. Still, more recent examples *are* available, most notably *The Corporation* (dir., Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbot).

The Corporation

In the mountain forests of the West Coast Salish lands, in August of 2003, a sheet was stretched between two towering coniferous as music thumped and lights pulsed in the background. A projector was connected to a generator, and with roughly two hundred ravers and nearby community members assembled, the switch was flipped and Mark

Achbar settled down on to the grass to share his new film, *The Corporation*, with its first audience/public. As the co-director of Canada's second-top-grossing feature film puts it: "It doesn't get more grassroots than that." (Personal Interview, Achbar, 2007) Achbar wanted "his people" – activists and artists – to see the film first, and where they saw it was of utmost importance. Screening a three-hour documentary about the negative qualities of big business inside a rain forest at a rave may seem like frivolous treatment of d/e for such a serious text, but this event is at the heart of grassroots, community-oriented d/e practices. Achbar was contributing to the construction of a counterpublic – where people had gathered to communicate, express, and create outside of a mainstream paradigm. Both the (sub)cultural context of embedding this screening inside a rave, as well as the unorthodox physical location of the screening feed into Fraser's conceptual framework of counterpublics. Following Fraser's line of thinking on publics and counterpublics, this rave screening, and others that followed it, contribute to articulations of community who lack the access to dominant, mediated publics.

Connecting to a social "movement" and various counterpublics were always the intentions behind the marketing, distribution and exhibition of *The Corporation*, while Achbar and business partner Katherine Dodds also had a "longtail" goal for the film that would exploit the buzz initiated by the margins, in order to eventually pique the interests of the mainstream. Achbar puts it this way: "As grassroots diminishes, mainstream increases." (Ibid) And so the multiple purpose of such grassroots d/e events becomes clearer: they serve to build counterpublics and contribute to social movements, as setting the stage for wider success and dissemination. The aforementioned *Breaking New Ground* report agrees: "The West Coast rave [resulted in] an underground buzz, which

soon secured its presence at an east coast rave, [and] has also been a critical factor in its subsequent success.” (*Breaking New Ground*, 2005, p.34). In an interview, I asked Achbar just how much success of *The Corporation* is owed to grassroots d/e efforts, and he responded:

100 per cent. Without that support the film would be nothing, otherwise I’d be appealing to housewives in Scarborough, but I don’t want to diminish the efforts of the mainstream marketing as well...It was the spark that got it going, and it reverberated in the mainstream. (Personal Interview, Achbar, 2007, p.3)

While nearly one million dollars was eventually spent on the “official” (i.e., non-grassroots) launch of the film (Erin Research Group, 2005, p.35) this mainstream effort would be significantly diminished without the groundswell of support that the grassroots community screenings inspired.

As sites of community-building and spaces for democratic participation, the grassroots events around the circulation and projection of *The Corporation* were also places of intense discussion and debate. Achbar recounts how after each screening, which were often broken up with intermissions enabling breaks for discussion and reflection, he would facilitate discussions around issues raised in the film, and inevitably the shape of the dialogue would be one of response, resistance and intervention to economic globalization and undemocratic corporate power and influence. (Personal Interview, Achbar, 2007, p.5) While the *Breaking New Ground* study imparts a well-worn cliché about documentaries – “Films can be highly emotive, stirring the heart as well as the mind” (2005, p.6) – in the case of harnessing film for counterpublics and sites of resistance, response and intervention as the grassroots screenings of *The Corporation* demonstrate, I would suggest that the stirring of the feet be added to this statement. As

the report continues, the authors acknowledge this aspect of these types of practices when they write:

Films can mobilize communities and activist networks, build new community partnerships; reinforce the resolve of the committed and converted, help lead to policy changes; “educate” within both formal and informal networks. Films can enter public discourse through community forums, conferences, theatrical screenings, print and broadcast media, universities and schools, grass-roots organizations and target groups. (2005, p.6)

The twin effects of social mobilization and the rupturing of the (dominant) public discursive space(s) are identified here, and it is no coincidence the report begins the section with reference to *The Corporation*.

Achbar reiterates these outcomes of the grassroots d/e of *The Corporation*, and describes the original movement of the film:

After the rave in BC organizers of *Evolve*, an outdoor music and cultural rave-like event on the East Coast, quickly heard about the film and wanted to screen it there. The buzz happened that quickly, so I set off for Halifax. After *Evolve* I went with the film to *Burning Man* in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada. It’s a massive counter-cultural event that brings thousands and thousands of artists, activists, freaks and others together for a week-long celebration of community and fringe culture in the middle of the desert. The film was shown as part of an art installation [described in the introduction to this thesis] and people talked a lot about it, were curious. After that, there were other grassroots screenings, such as the *Cinema Politica* screenings in Halifax and Montreal, where we had 800 students and public turn up. There were NDP screenings, Council of Canadian screenings, the Green Party and more. Then we hit the festival circuit. (Personal Interview, Achbar, 2007, p.1-2)

From this inconclusive list it is readily apparent that the initial dissemination of the film that would eventually become the top-grossing documentary in Canada of all time as well as an internationally celebrated work, was grassroots by nature. More than that, the screening spaces that Achbar describes are important counterpublics that exist in varying degrees in Canada from the margins (Salish rave) to the middle (NDP); yet the striking

commonality is that they are all spaces not defined and dominated by commercial values. These are the spaces defined by articulations of identity and community, without a market-motive as the engine, that would not find homes inside commercial spaces. These are indeed the spaces constructed after crawling under Kluge's fences referred to in Chapter II.

Katherine Dodds and Viral Marketing

That *The Corporation* is so widely cited and studied as a film that benefits from and to some extent redefines grassroots d/e practices, is at least in some part due to Katherine Dodds. From the film's inception in 1997 Achbar was in consultation with Dodds, whose background is social marketing and media promotions. Dodds created Good Company Communications and sister brand Hello Cool World out of the initial blueprints to promote, market and distribute *The Corporation* with grassroots innovation and business know-how. From the company's 2006 self-published report:

We specialize in idea distribution. We do this by integrating web-inclusive campaigns and multi-media marketing. Targeting both the mainstream and grassroots, we inspire and build active audiences and networks for your projects, with an eye towards maximizing positive social outcome. (Good Company Profile, 2006, p.3)

The concept of "idea distribution" is connected with Dodd's description of grassroots marketing and media dissemination, where grassroots may be the strategy, but *viral marketing* is the methodology. (Personal Interview, 2007, p.2) When asked to describe this process, Dodds offers the following:

Only a few filmmakers ever get official distributors, so grassroots is what filmmakers do all the time, that is, whatever it takes to get it out there; I call it viral marketing as you're still looking for your niche, when I think

of grassroots I think of an organization connected to it, more connected to the non-profit sector, etc., but the method for The Corporation was definitely viral...(Ibid, p.1)

Insinuated in this quotation is the differential between commercial and community, discussed throughout this thesis. Based on interviews conducted for this inquiry, it is my conclusion that when referring to independent documentary d/e, the term “official” connotes “commercial” or “mainstream.” So when Dodds refers to “official distribution” she is identifying the lack of Canadian documentary works that are in contract with commercial distributors in the country. However, grassroots distribution is what “filmmakers do all the time,” in other words, it’s the survival and creative instincts that are embodied in the industrious, volatile and community-oriented practices replete in self-distribution and/or grassroots distribution. She further describes grassroots as practices “connected to an organization” and associated with the non-profit sector, further supporting the conceptual framework differences between commercial and community d/e practices. When asked what she feels are the fundamental differences between commercial and grassroots d/e practices, Dodds summarizes:

One is based on investment and return commercial no matter what they think of the film, it’s a business POV. Grassroots gets to think of other factors such as issues and community. As it remains volunteer driven, you’ll have to play on people’s interest in the cause to support you...(Personal Interview, 2007, p.1)

While community-oriented d/e practices often mingle and merge with commercial frameworks, the fundamental difference is clearly articulated by Dodds – one is modeled around an intangible market and one is modeled around very real and tangible communities of people.

With *The Corporation* and its stylized critique of capitalism still spreading like a healthy virus from public to counterpublic across the globe, it is no wonder that Dodds is modelling her social marketing company after the project of distributing that particular set of ideas she and Achbar championed with their first documentary collaboration. She's even reduced the whole mandate of the company into one sentence that speaks volumes to the discursive space of grassroots d/e practices: "Ideas to audiences. Audiences to action. Action to outcome." (Ibid) From a promotional/marketing perspective it is glaringly clear that this is the mandate of a sector not driven by the need to make profit and return investment to shareholders. If it were, it may have a mandate that would include a line reading "Audiences to advertisers," as the commercial sector continues to focus on the money and not the message. Instead it is driven by message, by the need to build alternative ways of experiencing and mediating our world. It is the foregrounding of community spaces over the mandate of commercial interests.

However, when it comes to the commercial sector, Dodds is not at odds with the market mandate, at least not in terms of attacking it, or even devoting precious energies to reforming it. She is more interested in building alternatives, and finding ways to solve the problems of d/e she sees rooted in state funding institutions that neglect distribution in favour of production. When I ask her leading questions in our interview, un-tactfully lodging my own assumptions about the commercial theatre sector, Dodds doesn't bite. I ask if there should be legislation toward Canadian content regulation with theatres and commercial d/e in Canada. She firmly responds: "You can't blame the theatre owners, they own the spaces and need to maintain them." (Ibid) Achbar seems to agree and takes it one suggestive step further: "We don't need the theatres anymore. We create our own

spaces through grassroots practices. House party screenings worked great, the house party campaign. View, stop and talk, and develop plans and activate dissent.” (Personal Interview, 2007) It is a fresh approach to Canada’s problems around sharing and screening Canadian documentary cinema, and one that dovetails with citizens’ media practices outlined by Rodriguez and the creation of pluralistic democratic (counterpublic) spaces Mouffe discusses, both reviewed in the second chapter.

While Achbar and Dodds both make strong statements about “skipping the theatres” as Dodds puts it, *The Corporation* is predominantly cited for its success at the theatres. Indeed, the film is celebrated for entering the mainstream and taking middle-road Joe and Jane Q. Public by storm. The film grossed \$4.6 million worldwide, with the bulk of that amount coming from North American box office receipts (BoxofficeMojo.com, May 2007), a staggering figure for a documentary, especially a Canadian documentary. It is a fine balance then, it seems, for defining success with documentary as an agent for social change within grassroots practices. There is the success of the film for fulfilling Dodds’ mandate (Ideas to audiences. Audiences to action. Action to outcome.), as well as the success of achieving commercial success at the box office, and even making some money along the way. As Achbar has stated, the latter feeds off the former.

With this balancing act in mind, it is clear that the foremost concern for Achbar and Dodds is for the grassroots movement and sharing of the film. Achbar was interested in tapping into communities sympathetic to the message in the film, while offering the text as another tool to help build counternarratives to the dominant story of successful economic globalization. (Personal Interview, 2007) Achbar wove the message and filmic

power of his documentary into counterhegemonic manifestations within a disparate, but interconnected grassroots counterpublic sphere. The participation in this matrix of counterpublics of marginal and/or marginalized groups has meant the absorption of the film into an articulation of another space for cinema, one located outside the megaplex and even deep into the forest, quite literally.

Cameron Haynes and Film Circuit

While Dodds and Achbar may feel the theatre circuit is impenetrable, or at least a delivery system for cinema that is soon to be outdated by other digital forms of distribution and exhibition (Personal Interview, 2007) others are responding to the lack of access and diversity in Canada's exhibition market with a different sort of aplomb. Cameron Haynes is one such person, and his approach is to build alternatives as well, only in the case of Film Circuit, the space is inside commercial theatres, not outside. Haynes, the Director of Film Circuit, was the founder of Cinéfest – the Sudbury Film Festival – which started in 1989 with immediate success and lead to the concept of the Circuit. From the Film Circuit website write-up on Haynes and his start:

He recognized that the press coverage and resulting popularity of Canadian films with Festival audiences (in Sudbury and in Toronto) generated widespread interest in these films in smaller communities. He believed that this interest could be translated into additional attendance and box office revenues by using similar “event” style screenings which consolidated attendance and minimized costs. Haynes also recognized that, just as Cinéfest and the Toronto International Film Festival directors functioned as “curators” for their particular festivals, it was important that each individual community “curate” its own screening events to maximize each community's level of commitment and sense of ownership. (This deviates from the usual exhibitor driven model.) (Film Circuit, April 2007)

Haynes quickly realized there was an appetite for more diversity – including Canadian films and documentaries – in the communities not considered “mature markets” which are generally listed as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (In fact, to describe a film release as “national” in Canada, it need only be commercially released at theatres in Vancouver and Toronto). When asked what he attributes to the success of the first year of the festival having 10,000 people show up for 8,000 seat spots (Personal Interview, 2007) the first thing Haynes mentions, similarly to Dodds, is marketing. However, Haynes points out that it took some time for audience’s taste to develop for the “smaller films” so that the first year lesser known Canadian films did not do so well, but by year five “there was demand.” (Ibid)

From the beginning of Cinéfest - which was really the precursor to Film Circuit - there was demand for films that were not appearing in the Sudbury megaplexes. Haynes drives this point home: “I started the Circuit because there is an appetite for these kinds of films. We don’t need more film festivals in Canada, we need these films playing regularly.” (Ibid) And so the idea to move away from the festival model and work with theatres in secondary and tertiary markets across the country was developed into Film Circuit. The name conjures the movement of NFB-assisted film councils in the forties and fifties, where a projectionist would travel to smaller Canadian communities and show films in schools, churches and other non-theatrical sites, but the difference with Haynes’s Circuit is that each film group curates its own films and makes its own schedule – and the screenings take place in commercial venues. The initiative has tremendous corporate support, while professing to harness grassroots methods to get films screened and seen.

From the description on the Film Circuit website, the project's structure and aims are described:

A division of the Toronto International Film Festival Group, Film Circuit is an association of over 190 film groups that screen short and feature films throughout Canada. Film Circuit also promotes and tours Canadian films throughout the world...The main goal of Film Circuit is to promote Canadian and international cinema through grassroots distribution, marketing and exhibition...Programming is a collaboration between the Circuit office and individual film groups. Release schedules are issued throughout the year, and each group selects films according to local demand. The Film Circuit office then books films based on availability as determined by the distributor. (*Film Circuit*, April 2007)

As stated, this system is quite different to the way commercial exhibition sites in Canada program and schedule their films – which, typically is dictated from outside the country, as with AMC Canada and their centralized programming flowing from Kansas City. (Personal Interview, 2006) The initiative is similar to Cinema Politica in that there is a centralized screening pool that semi-autonomous satellite groups draw from to fashion their own programming with.

While Film Circuit does not mention documentary in its mandate, Haynes tells me that approximately ten per cent of the Circuit films are documentaries (out of 258 films screened, over two dozen have been docs), and he is convinced of a doc-insurgency attracting the cinemagoing public: “There is a documentary renaissance that we’re in. A lot of documentaries are aimed at real life material, you know, the world just can’t be saved every day, as it is in Hollywood films.” (Ibid, p.3) Haynes says that ten years prior, he couldn’t “give documentaries away” (Ibid) but now there is a swelling demand for them, which he associates with the over-40 demographic that Hollywood is not catering to. Either way, the initiative includes documentary, as it is primarily concerned with independent works, and by default that is the category where one finds most

documentaries in Canada. Haynes adds: “The Circuit was developed to help the industry and to help Canadian independent film and video find a home beyond festivals.” (Ibid, p.2)

The discursive space that Haynes’s words fill conjure the work of Dorland and his project of mapping the trajectory of film policy and film policy discourse from governmentalism to economism. However, no a new stage needs to be added to accommodate for new approaches like Film Circuit, that are addressing Canada’s cinema problems. A next phase, it would seem, is *volunteerism* (or the very awkward *non-profitism*). Behind this discussion of getting independent films out to Canada’s public are countless community-organizer volunteers and dedicated people helping to spread the buzz (or “viral market as Dodds would put it) about grassroots screenings. While the Film Circuit does employ nine staff members, the project is part of the Toronto International Film Group, a non-profit organization. Haynes explains that for each film that screens, the proceeds are divided up into thirds: “One third for the exhibitor, one third for the distributor, and one third for the community group.” (Ibid, p.4) Despite little room for profit, Haynes says that the Circuit “creates between two and three million dollars of revenue in the market that was not there before.” (Ibid, p.5)

With Cineplex Odeon, Bell Canada and Warner Brothers on board as funding sponsors, (Ibid, p.4) it may seem difficult to see this initiative as ‘counter’ anything, especially in terms of addressing the “historic bloc” of a domestic cinemascap dominated by big studio, American-produced fiction. How can Film Circuit even call itself grassroots when it works with large multinationals and pulls in an annual budget tipping the scales between \$300,000 and \$400,000 per year? (Ibid, p.4) Unlike other

alternative initiatives responding to the multifaceted problems of Canada's d/e mediascape that will be mentioned later in this chapter, Film Circuit is well-funded, has a sustained, paid staff, and works within the 'big business' rubric of commercial d/e. Yet Haynes, when asked, is absolute in his conviction that it is indeed a grassroots project. In his words:

Are we grassroots? Completely. Because there is no business money behind the Circuit. We went to commercial exhibitors because we had no money for infrastructure. We're grassroots because we deploy many grassroots strategies – many volunteers, pamphlets that advertise screenings, etc....Go to any one of a *Film Circuit* screenings anywhere in the country and it feels like a grassroots experience. (Personal Interview, 2007, p.4)

There are a few interlocking claims to disentangle here. Haynes says there is no business money behind the Circuit, but obviously, with sponsors like Bell and Warner Brothers, its presence cannot be eradicated by one comment. Haynes is adamant in his description of Film Circuit as a grassroots project because of the "methods" deployed, which is the commonly stated signifier for many groups that consider themselves grassroots in the field of independent cinema and especially documentary, yet even large multinationals and governments have been known to use "grassroots methods" to deliver specific messages to respective audiences.

The part of the above statement that is crucial to the question of "Are you grassroots" for my research is in Haynes's comment on the *feeling* of a *grassroots experience*. Reminiscent of Williams's "structure of feeling" around a cultural phenomena, it is the spaces that are created by this initiative that really make it grassroots, or community-oriented, despite the fact that screenings take place at commercial (predominantly CineplexOdeon-owned) sites. Indeed, it is the way in which

people experience the screenings, and how they make associations with a commercial or community oriented experience. As volunteer organizers at Film Circuit sites usually speak before and after screenings (Ibid) as well as inviting guests to speak, as well as the fact that most *Film Circuit* groups are connected with grassroots organizations with their own constituencies that are harnessed to put bums on seats, it is not surprising the screenings *feel* “grassroots.”

As this and other examples illustrate, the spaces, processes, experiences and articulations of the cultural activities around d/e point to a fluidity and heterogeneity as discussed by way of Williams and others in Chapter II. Williams’s critique of cultural analysis that commodifies and neatly packages experiences into “finished products” (Williams, 1977, p.128) opens the way for imagining and theorizing the structure of feeling around d/e, one that, much like the typology of genres, is much more complicated and unpredictable than may appear. For instance, organizers of Montreal’s First Peoples’ Festival – a film festival highlighting works by and about aboriginal peoples – may consider Film Circuit’s films “mainstream” due to the titles exhibited such as *Bon Cop*, *Bad Cop* and *Capote*, and the fact that Film Circuit screens in commercial, for-profit cinemahouses, including megaplexes. Alternately, Film Circuit organizers defend the “grassroots” label by pointing to the non-mainstream nature of their films, such as *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* and *Sharkwater*, as well as how the screenings are organized, by local groups, not business interests. As discussed in Chapter II, the fluidity of these spaces and practices allow for a mediascape on the one hand saturated by multinational fantasy entertainment brokers who help form a larger, global Gramscian block; but as well, the existence of counterpublics proliferate, where groups construct

their own community-oriented spaces with the some of the same tools used to build the “master’s house.” (, ed., 2002, p.193)

Film Circuit and its 200 affiliates spread across Canada is the active engagement of moving through the interplay of cultural hegemony and counterpublics (again, as described in Chapter II). What makes *Film Circuit* so interesting and crucial to this study is that it is a kind of hybrid response to the problem of Canada’s cinema(s). It is not a radical intervention in the Zimmermann sense, nor is it a corporate marketing ploy posing as grassroots, otherwise known as “astroturf” (Beder, 1998; Patel, 2005). It is an initiative created with one of the elements of Canada’s cinema problem space, the distributor/exhibitors not in an effort to reform their political economy or even their standard practices, but rather their associative structure and the spaces where they ‘do business.’ There is a certain Trojan Horse element to Film Circuit; Haynes has found a way to get more diverse content, including documentary and Canadian works, into commercial cinema spaces, by establishing a fair playing field for all three stakeholders (the thirds split mentioned earlier). Like Dodds and Achbar, Haynes is rightly concerned with building an audience, and says: “We need a more concentrated effort to get these films into the mainstream and most of all we need to build an audience.” (Ibid, p.5) It’s a building process that is not happening completely outside the dominant sphere of commercial cinema, but rather smaller spheres that introduce the margins slowly, are being built inside the otherwise impenetrable Hollywood fortresses of mainstream exhibition sites.

The ‘mainstream’ that Film Circuit is operating in extends across the country, and includes very small communities like Bowen Island, BC, as well as larger communities

like Charlottetown, PEI. The initiative seems to have some kind of tried and tested formula for its success, as Haynes describes:

I spent five years or so trying to come up with the perfect formula for having an independent film achieve success at the box office. We found that if we played the film for one week, everyone would lose in the end – the exhibitor, the distributor, and the marketer, but condense that one week into one night and everyone does OK...And, how can you really market a film like *Scared Sacred* in the same theatre as *Lord of the Rings*?..So in the end, with the one night screenings, [this varies, some Film Circuit screenings run more than one evening] the theatre got his theatre full, the distributor got his films shown, and the local group organizing the screening could successfully market the film to the community. (Ibid, p.2)

While this approach – having minimal time slotted for independent works – appears to be a “soft” advance from the Indy margins to the megaplex mainstream, it is a start. Haynes and many others in the industry realize that an audience for diverse content – different from what has been in the theatres for the last 70 years – will not materialize over night, it has to be built brick by brick (or in this case, bum by bum). Or, as Kirwan Cox puts it: “Canadian audiences that are used to riding around in Cadillacs don’t want to suddenly switch to riding bicycles,” (Personal Interview, 2007, p3) in reference to audiences getting accustomed to lower budget, independent, films.

The grassroots response to the lack of diversity in Canada’s d/e networks and sites is multifaceted, and I would argue, a unifying, linking ingredient to all grassroots d/e initiatives is the orientation around community, it bears consideration that community itself is heterogeneous. Mitchell used grassroots d/e to help build a movement of First Nations communities in their struggle against an oppressive state and society; Achbar located his initial screenings of what would ultimately be an incredibly commercially successful documentary in communities he sought solidarity and support from, and in return, allowed his film to flow through channels and networks that formed the

connective tissue of a social movement seeking alternatives to the current economic global regime; Dodds sees communities both as audiences that constitute the “demand” her company supplies, as well as the real feet under the mobility of the film in question, to *virally* spread important messages from the margins toward the middle; finally, Haynes sees communities as the semi-autonomous film groups around the country that are working in concert with his organization to build audiences in the commercial sector hungry for diversity. All locate their discursive and geographic spaces within non-mainstream communities in order to successfully deliver diversity to Canadian publics.

Film Circuit is a growing force, and its “returns” are indeed impressive. The d/e network has injected millions into the cinema market in Canada, without resorting to studio films as high visibility crutches (or “tent poles” to adapt industry parlance). It is not a response that is in an opposition stance to Hollywood, but seeks to build on its empire. As Haynes says: “Hollywood did a lot of the hard work, especially in the 30s and 40s – building cinema culture. But now it’s up to us to keep building. The two systems can coexist: Hollywood and independent.” (Personal Interview, 2007, p.5) This dual strain, post-policy approach is one of a kind in Canada, at least at the national scale, and begs for further, deeper examination over a protracted research time frame of several years.

While other initiatives such as *Cinema Politica*, *Evolve* and the *Montreal Underground Film Festival* attempt to (re)locate cinema culture off the megaplex map, Film Circuit continues to partner with commercial exhibitors on their own turf to address content diversity issues that have eluded or been neglected by policymakers for nearly a century in this country. At the end of the day, Haynes wants diverse films reaching every

Canadian, and is doing it by way of a patchwork of committed communities across the landscape. “We’re thinking of trying to reverse a trend of 100 years of studio programming – it’s not an easy task, but the Circuit is growing.” (Ibid) Haynes may not sound like he’s exactly “taking on Hollywood” but the groups that make up Film Circuit are certainly crawling under a few fortified fences.

Commercially Yours: AMC and Policy Research

Many metaphorical and real fences surround some of Canada’s largest exhibition sites, an industry worth half a billion dollars annually at the box office. (*Profile 2007*, p.17) With Canadians attending screenings at commercial cinema venues 123 million times in 2006 (Ibid) in a country of 33 million, it is not difficult to locate the country’s dominant cinemagoing practices. One such location is AMC 22 Forum in Montreal, where David LeRoy has been the Managing Director for 9 years. This particular exhibition site in the AMC chain has a reputation for holding more community-oriented events that are outside the confines of corporate culture than other commercial exhibitors. It also tends toward more diversity in its programming than Cineplex (formerly Famous Players) or Montreal’s very own Guzzo Theatres. LeRoy claims the Kansas City-based company is in dialogue with the Montreal management and has been made to understand the “liberal” nature of the city and the diverse Quebec cultures it is embedded in. Others in the industry, such as former Cinema du Parc programmer Mitch Davis, claim that AMC is trying to carve out a niche within the megaplex market as more friendly-friendly and a foreign film supporter, and in doing so is cutting into the precarious territory of the independently owned theatres, especially art house and second run cinemahouses such as

Cinema du Parc, which announced closure shortly after my interview with Davis (it has since re-opened as a non-profit with new ownership and a new mandate). (Personal Interview, 2006, p.1)

Whatever the motivation behind their programming, it is most intriguing that AMC works with community groups to arrange discount screenings/events, has a feedback system for “clients” (a.k.a. audience members) to suggest titles (LeRoy tells me that 20 people requested *What the Bleep do We Know* (dir., Arntz and Chasse, 2004), prompting the theatre to screen the documentary), and programs more diverse fare than its direct competitors in the megaplex market. This is all reason enough to include the site in this research, as borders and fences blur between grassroots and commercial in initiatives like Film Circuit, commercially-oriented chains like AMC present intriguing cases for the commercial/community relationship that, in the case of the Kansas City company, is clearly commercially top-heavy.

When localized sites of responsive construction to media hegemony and/or homogeneity develop, they are often – despite popular rhetoric of ICT networking and the “digital commons” – firmly planted in on-the-ground locations, accountable and responsive to on-the-ground communities with social and cultural investments in the specific media projects. Following this, the fundamental difference between commercial and community oriented cinema d/e sites is found in the linkages between the screens, the participants/audiences, the programmers, and the managers/managers. Tracing these linkages with initiatives like *Cinema Politica* or *Film Circuit* brings the researcher to multiple communities where proximities between the above elements are close. For example, the Film Circuit group in Kindersely, Saskatchewan is comprised of local

community members who make up the Kindersley and District Arts Council. (Film Circuit site, May 2007) The Cinema Politica local at UBC is made up of members of the UBC Students for a Democratic Society – local activists who live in communities around the Vancouver area. In the case of the AMC 22, the linkages become distant, strained, and tensions between local community and global commercial orientations become apparent.

LeRoy claims relations between Kansas City and Montreal are amicable and open concerning localized programming for the theatre. However, he does acknowledge a struggle of sorts, and reveals a fundamental tension when probed. He admits, to a certain extent, the power relations bound up in the studio-distribution-exhibition chain:

Studios can be aggressive in controlling the exhibition of their films – George Lucas is an example. Here at AMC, we chose not to show the *Aristocrats*, because they decided in Kansas City that the material wasn't appropriate for the audiences that AMC caters to. I didn't entirely agree with this decision, as I know the Montreal market – and how liberal the audience is here – better than the executives in Kansas City, but sometimes, you have to go with the decisions that don't always make sense to you. (Personal Interview, 2006, p.2)

LeRoy makes no claims of the theatre being a grassroots entity, but he does articulate a position of the Montreal site as one that is more responsive and accessible to local communities. Yet, with programming decisions and ultimate management authority located thousands of kilometers away, in another city and even another country, it is not difficult to see the compromised position community finds itself in, at the (invisible) hands of commerce.

When I ask LeRoy about whose interest the AMC he manages operates on behalf of – investors/shareholders, “global” audiences, Hollywood studios, or local communities

– he brings up the infamous line of business that is seldom used to describe community-oriented d/e initiatives:

The bottom line is it is a business and you are trying to look at your bottom line. You can't hide the fact that big blockbusters are what will draw people in, but I don't think it is right. Quality films seem to slip through the cracks...I actually prefer the quality products over the ones that are succeeding on massive marketing and hype, but we're running a business, and if the big blockbusters are drawing in the crowds, then we have to go with programming them. There have been exceptions, like *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Corporation*, where we had big crowds showing up less because of mass marketing and more because a 'buzz' had been generated about the film....(Ibid, p.3)

Commercially-oriented sites of d/e retain an allegiance to the mythic “bottom line” while community-oriented sites gauge success on a variety of participatory, educational, cultural and socio-political indicators that tend to be more fluid and indefinable than the “rules” and boundaries of economics. LeRoy and the AMC in Montreal present an interesting case, where a manager admits preference for films that are not the Hollywood/megaplex fare (and mentions in the interview at one point that he himself goes to Cinema du Parc regularly to satisfy his independent and foreign content needs), and describes tensions between management edicts passed down from the disconnected head office in Kansas City and the knowledge he possesses concerning the local communities the AMC operates in. Mention of “the bottom line” seems to be a prerequisite inclusion in LeRoy's discourse on the commercial industry, in order to ground the conversation in the “realities” of running a business, regardless of its operations. He reiterates, later: “From a business standpoint there is a bottom line, we have to maintain profitability.” (Ibid, p.3) Then adds what appears to be the flip-side, the articulation of the tension: “Canadian theatres have a responsibility to promote local talent and products, but exhibitors currently do not.” (Ibid)

That said, AMC is paying more attention, at least, to their local constituency than Canadian-owned Cineplex, “the largest Canadian exhibitor of motion pictures.” (Onex.com) Indeed, a company headquartered in Kansas City is carving a niche for itself in Montreal, somewhere between art house, community screening centre and megaplex. As well, Toronto-based Onex Corp, who owns Cineplex, screens mostly American big studio blockbusters, bringing in \$740 million in revenue for the year 2006. (Ibid) *The Corporation*’s director and principle marketer eschew mainstream theatres as a focus for “success” for a social documentary, yet the film earns more than any other Canadian documentary of all time (\$3.5 Million)¹⁸ and up until very recently was listed by Boxofficemojo.com in the top 20 best selling documentaries for North America (it now sits at number 22, thanks in part to *Sicko* and *An Inconvenient Truth*).¹⁹ Further, Film Circuit is modeled in the grassroots tradition and prides itself in such description, yet the initiative strives to bring independent cinema to audiences in small communities, often by way of chain theatres. These are indeed complicated scenarios in volatile environments of community, commerce and cinema. The examples illustrated in this chapter should help to show how fluid and multi-dimensional the cultural spaces and practices around documentary d/e are in Canada. In the concluding chapter, I now reflect upon the possibilities, tensions, and intersections discussed throughout the thesis.

¹⁸ cbc.ca/arts/film/mogul.html

¹⁹ boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS ON THE SPACES BETWEEN

This guide [to a Century of Canadian Cinema] does not include, with a few notable exceptions, documentary, experimental, collage, underground, compilation, music and dance, or animated film.

(Gerald Pratley, 2003, p.6)

Hegemonic discursive formations – originating in power centers, based on well-established theories, backed by mighty institutions, with billions of dollars behind them – colonize subhegemonic discourses originating in regional experience yet interpreted through conventions that often correspond to universal norms. In turn, both are confronted by alternatives deriving more directly from different interpretations of the varying experiences of oppressed peoples. As Raymond Williams insisted, “the hegemonic” is neither total nor exclusive. Rather, alternative or oppositional cultures continue.

(Richard Peet, 2002, p.60)

Prately's 400-plus page volume *A Century of Canadian Cinema* is indicative of documentary's continued marginalization among cinema writers and scholars: the book denies documentary the place(s) it deserves in a “Feature Film Guide” for Canadian cinema and the author does not even venture to offer any explanation, as if this kind of omission is what Bourdieu would call “common sense.” Despite such continued ghettoization, non-fiction cinema is part of a media-led zeitgeist, whether it is propagated by way of streaming and downloading, box office tickets or “alternative or oppositional cultures,” (Peet, 2002) such as grassroots d/e spaces and practices. It is true that documentary may very well be *the* media “buzzword” these days (and no longer the red-headed cousin), with the genre at its highest ratings in terms of the public radar. For

example, Achbar relates to me that besides its commercial and grassroots success, *The Corporation* has been downloaded from torrents (both illegally and legally, with the “director-approved” download version) over a quarter of a million times. For a Canadian documentary that challenges some of the fundamental aspects of hegemony (a neoliberal economic hegemony), these numbers are impressive. Magazines and journals (e.g., *Studies in Documentary Film*), along with conferences (the *Visible Evidence* Series and *Witness*’s inaugural 2007 seminar), articles and books on documentary, continue to proliferate. Celebrities have taken up the trade of cinematic truthing, and documentary filmmaker Peter Wintonick was even awarded the prestigious Governor General’s award for outstanding contribution in the visual arts the year before last. Film festivals like Toronto-based *Hot Docs* continue to grow perhaps beyond their own mandates, while a conservationist-activist documentary like *Sharkwater* is currently distributed by Alliance Atlantis, grossing over \$756,000 at commercial theatres since its release just three months ago. (boxofficemojo.com) Perhaps in the end documentaries will be the Trojan Horse that bring diversity to Canadian cinemas. Then again, the Hollywood action film *Transformers* did \$8.8 million on its opening night in North America. Regardless of the “buzz,” numbers can shift perspective (and perception) but they offer no insight into the spaces this thesis has discussed, the spaces between box office charts, megaplex marquees, and *Globe and Mail* features championing the “truth genre.”

When filmmakers like Mark Achbar launch a campaign to have his documentary shown at parties, raves, in homes, churches, parks, basements, schools, and other ‘off the mainstream grid spaces,’ he is engaged in a process that challenges hegemony. Hegemony is a social construct filtered into populations by dominant groups that have

often managed to secure resources required to bring their way of seeing and experiencing the world to the foreground. In terms of any “Hollywood hegemony” (Miller et al, 2005) that grips the Canadian film industry, (Beaty, 2006) it is part of a matrix of cultural and financial forces that form a larger discursive hegemony Bourdieu describes as “The Tyranny of the Market” (1998) held together by a “façade of legitimation” (Negt, Kluge and Labanyi, 1988, p.61) This prevailing “common sense.” (Peet, 2002; Bourdieu, 1988a) is indeed neoliberalism. Inherent to this economic ideology of open markets, free trade and the accumulation of capital (Albo, 2002) is the process of commodification and control of resources, including media resources (Leys, 2001), especially media cartels (Negt et al. Ibid). As states and large transnational corporations consolidate costs through processes of privatization and trade deregulation (Leys, Ibid) some spaces open up while other close. The spaces for financial firms to trade on “commodities” like timber and water open up, while the spaces for an independent documentary challenging the privatization of water (for example) close up, or at least become tighter.

Neoliberal discourse has infected government policy, from natural resources to cultural expression. In the case of the latter, it can be found in decisions to deregulate ownership of media in Canada, or in a recent report on the country’s miserable film industry, where policy writers, in an unabashed nod to the (free) market, state: “...technology is handing the scheduling keys to the consumer...” (*Profile 2007*, 2007, p.5) In a world constructed out of the hegemony of neoliberalism, technology is anthropomorphized, and becomes a friendly being capable of engendering decision-making power in consumers, not citizens. This logic would lead to the belief that technology, or the equally benevolent market, is also capable of handing over content to

consumers. What I have argued in the preceding pages is that consumers, disguised as citizens, are the agents fighting such hegemonic tendencies by forming not just their own heterogeneous content, but also diverse spaces, schedules and channels of content sharing and flows. In short, democratic spaces that inevitably act as counter-hegemonic sites of media production, dissemination, and transfer.

This multiplicity of groups, organizations, institutions and individuals is key to conceiving and realizing a democracy capable of outgrowing the present confining liberal articulation(s) that now is global. As Chantal Mouffe reminds: “The constitution of democratic individuals can only be made possible by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values.” (Mouffe, 2000, p.11) Grassroots initiatives that focus on collective values and articulate a sense of community and publicness over commerce and controlled private property are part of the multiplying factor Mouffe alludes to. The spaces that were created during screenings of *Your are On Indian Land*, *The Corporation*, and *Haiti: Harvest of Hope* contribute to democratic public spheres. Mouffe concludes that in order to tackle the problems of increased individualization and privatization (which she argues lead to citizen withdrawal from socio-political engagement, an essential ingredient for agonistic pluralism) we need to foster such spaces as the ones described in the previous pages. She writes: “The only way is to envisage democratic citizenship from a different perspective, one that puts the emphasis on the types of practices and not the forms of argumentation.” (Ibid) Indeed, the grassroots d/e spaces and practices described articulate community through the context of the screenings as much if not more than the content of what is being screened. The films are the rallying point, the catalyst, but the processes, experiences, and “sense of place”

that build around them are the essence of the contribution to Mouffe's democracy. At the same time, these spaces between confront the massive artifices of neoliberal capitalism that – like giant megaplexes connected to massive marketing campaigns for blockbuster releases – dwarf counterpublics.

Neoliberal hegemony champions economies of scale, where consolidated and protected capital produces big budget cinema with dazzling aesthetics, couched in an enmeshed strain of celebrity culture. Blockbusters are then marketed with millions of dollars and global systems that disseminate cultural information across millions of “channels” like fast food restaurants, supermarkets, books, CDs, amusement parks, and of course theatres. It is no surprise *The Transformers* – a high-tech movie about toys that change into vehicles – earned nearly \$10 million on its opening night. As Peter S. Grant and Chris Wood argue, it is not magic or taste necessarily, it is “in the mathematics.” (Grant and Wood, 2004, p.83). When it comes to commercial exhibition spaces, they maintain: “The outcome is not rocket science: a rational exhibitor will give her best play dates to the big boys.” (Ibid, p.85) They further their argument by writing that the object of “the game” is to make the most profit, and that exhibition is just where things get started. (Ibid) With integrated global media cartels and financial institutions connecting the dots, the numbers for this aspect of the neoliberal “game” fair well, for some.

As stated earlier, not all efforts outside of this system are oppositional and/or progressive,²⁰ but I would argue that all the grassroots d/e articulations described here are counter-hegemonic, and are leaning toward the democratic and progressive. As with the quote that introduced this chapter, “alternative spaces” often percolate through the

²⁰ In *The Cultural Resistance Reader* Ralph Ginzburg reminds readers of this caveat when he recounts one of many “counterpublic” events that occurred in Georgia, USA, in the 1920s: a mob that brutally tortures and murders by lynching an African American man.

dominant veneers in culture, so that groups and individuals of varying oppressed or marginalized degrees are able to find space in order to experience their (social) world. The small communities Film Circuit caters to are indeed marginalized from cinema culture – their chapters exist to fill a cultural void in their respective community, in order to bring diverse, independent cinema into smaller towns, and *under the fence* of the megaplex as it were (although, curiously, often aided and abetted by commercial theatres driven by profit still). Film Circuit is indicative of the complexity of the ideas of community and commercial, with its emphasis on community empowerment and its artifice of commercial (often chain) exhibition sites. The complexity of commercial cinema cites and community is perhaps described by Negt et al. here: “... the productive structure of publicity, and the non-public experience linked with it, separates itself from its mere manifestation in the apparatus of distribution – publicity as a finished product that is publicly experienced.” (Negt, Kluge and Labanyi, 1988, p.74) Film Circuit is facilitating the desires of localized groups to shape their own programming and spaces around such programming, while at the same time they provide opportunities for commercial theatres to make profits from such ventures. In other words, the publicness of the screenings is negotiated between the community of Film Circuit organizers and the management at the particular theatre. At these screenings, citizens are empowered as community members articulating cultural exchange, and thus challenge the mere consumption aspect of the “finished product” of a film and realize the potential of a shared, “public experience.”

Negt et al. discuss the dominant “production public sphere” that is forming the boundaries that make up the “façade of legitimation” as one in which the “roots are not

public: they work the raw material of everyday life, which, in contrast to the traditional forms of publicity, derive their penetrative force directly from capitalist production.” (Ibid, p.63) The dominant neoliberal discourse seeks to erase the boundaries between democracy and capitalism, collapsing them together as an intertwined inevitability of the so-called logic of humanity. (Giroux, 2004, p.25) Giroux writes: “Within this dystopian universe, the public realm is increasingly reduced to an instrumental space in which individuality reduces self-development to the relentless pursuit of personal interests...” (Ibid) Countering this picture are the examples mentioned in this thesis, and countless other spaces across Canada where groups and individuals are rejecting the dystopian vision of individualism and “consumer-choice democracy” and instead building heterogeneous contact zones of media, culture and community.

The nexus for these contact zones is cinema, and as a medium, it provides opportunities to transform the experience of spectatorship into participation, with the proper context of course. Uricchio writes: “As an expressive medium, film has the capacity for critical contestation and cultural unification, for creative tension and variation as a source of cultural renewal. As a mass medium, it has the potential to share this process, reaching across islands of parochial interest by constructing new publics.” (Uricchio, 1996) In this way, grassroots d/e spaces and practices use cinema to express collective identity through political engagement and civic empowerment. Mouffe writes that power is at the centre of challenges to hegemony: “But if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question for democratic politics is not how to eliminate power but how to constitute forms of power more compatible with democratic values.” (Mouffe, 2000, p.14) This is the essence of grassroots d/e practices

that build counterpublics with the tools of cinema. The confrontational aspect of the Haiti screening described earlier led not to a riot or violence, but to an emotional, respectful and constructive dialogue and debate about the issues effecting the community. By shaping that space into a democratic arena for that discussion, members of that community are constituting power away from mainstream articulations and framing of the issues into the realm of a counterpublic with democratic tendencies. As these spaces between continue to rupture the global fabric of corporate media cartels and articulate their own vision and reality of community, fragments of a counterpublic mediascape emerge to contribute to a democracy on the ground. These cultural spaces and practices around grassroots distribution and exhibition of documentary cinema are important to understanding hegemony and resistances to it. It is my hope therefore, that this thesis is but one of many more investigations into these spheres, and that the research will continue.

APPENDIX A

The following is a descriptive sample of commercial theatre programming in Montreal, Quebec on Tuesday, May 23, 2006. It is meant to illustrate the lack of diversity of content at commercial exhibitors in the city, and is not meant to be a scientific study. Given more time and resources, one could do a repetitive sampling that spanned a greater amount of time to possibly discern more complete results. This sample is given as a descriptive overview in order to bring some details to the thesis text. Data collected by Ezra Winton.

(Bracketed information indicated country of production)

Documentaries and productions originating from other locations than the USA are indicated in **bold**.

Playing at AMC Forum 22:

Akeelah and the Bee (USA)
 American Dreamz (USA)
 An American Haunting (USA)
 Art School Confidential (USA)
 Don't Come Knocking (France/Germany/USA)
 Friends with Money (USA)
 Just My Luck (USA)
 Match Point (UK/USA/Luxemburg)
 Over the Hedge (USA)
 The Promise (China/Hong Kong/Japan/South Korea)
 RV (Germany/USA)
 Scary Movie 4 (USA)
 See No Evil (USA)
 The Sentinel (USA)
Sophie Scholl: The Final Days (Germany)
 Stick It (USA)
 Thank You For Smoking (USA)

Playing at Guzzo Theatres:

Langelier 6:

Da Vinci Code (USA)
 L'ère de glace 2: la fonte (USA - Ice Age 2)
 C'est bien ma chance (USA - Just My Luck)
 Le Poseidon vf (USA - Poseidon)
 VR (USA - RV)

Central 18:

Nos voisins les hommes (USA - Over the Hedge)
 Over the Hedge (USA)
 Da Vinci Code (USA)
 The Da Vinci Code (USA)
 C'est bien ma chance (USA - Just my Luck)
 Just My Luck (USA)
 Mission: impossible 3 vf (USA - MI3)
 Mission: Impossible III (USA)
 Le Poseidon vf (USA - Poseidon)
 Poseidon (USA)
 RV (USA)

Playing at Famous Players / Paramount (Cineplex Entertainment):

Famous Players:

The Da Vinci Code (USA)
 Poseidon (USA)
 Poseidon: The IMAX Experience (USA)
 Mission: Impossible III (USA)
 United 93 (USA)
 Lucky Number Slevin (USA)
 Ice Age 2: The Meltdown (USA)
 Inside Man (USA)

Quartier Latin:

Da Vinci code, vf (USA)
 Le regard du Diable (USA - See No Evil)
 Nos voisins les hommes (USA - Over the Hedge)
 C'est bien ma chance (USA - Just my Luck)
Delivrez-moi (Quebec)
 Le Poseidon (USA)
Stupeur et tremblements (France/Japan - Fear Trembling)
La Moustache (France)
 Mission: Impossible III (USA)
WUJI: La legende des cavaliers du vent (China/Hong Kong/Japan/South Korea - The Promise)
 United 93 vf (USA)
Entrez dans la danse (France - Documentary)
Un dimanche a Kigali (Quebec)
 L'ere de glace: La fonte (USA)

StarCite Montreal:

Da Vinci Code vf (USA)
 Le Regard Du Diable (USA - See No Evil)
 Nos Voisons Les Hommes (USA - Over the Hedge)

The Da Vinci Code (USA)
C'est Bien Ma Chance (USA - Just My Luck)
Delivrez-moi (Quebec)
Le Poseidon (USA - Poseidon)
Mission: Impossible 3, vf (USA)
United 93 (USA)
VR (USA - RV)
Silent Hill, vf (USA)
Film De Peur 4 (USA - Scary Movie 4)
La Vie Sauvage (USA - The Wild)
Entrez Dans La Danse (France - Documentary)
L'ere De Glace 2: La Fonte (USA - Ice Age 2: The Meltdown)

Versailles
Nos Voisons Les Hommes (USA - Over the Hedge)
The Da Vinci Code (USA)
La Planete Blanche (Quebec/France - Documentary)
Poseidon (USA)
Mission: Impossible 3, vf (USA)

APPENDIX B

Sample Interview Questions for Mark Achbar:

1. When and where was the Corporation first screened publicly?
2. Describe the trajectory of the film's screening life from the first screening to now.
3. Did the film have a distributor?
4. How much of the Corporation's success is owed to grassroots organizing, distribution and exhibition efforts?
5. Did the Corporation ever go "mainstream" into the commercial cinemas in Canada?
6. After Canada, where did the film go?
7. What would you say is the biggest obstacle to Canadian filmmakers, especially doc makers, to getting their films seen in theatres by the Canadian public?
8. Other countries have screen quotas for film and Canada's music industry has quotas, do you think we need some kind of policy in place for film given our proximity to the US? Why or why not? What kind of policy if yes?
9. There is a lot of emphasis put on production when it comes to film (including docs) in Canada, and little on distribution/exhibition. Why do you think this is, and do you think that it's a good balance the way it is?
10. What is your advice to aspiring Canadian doc makers who want to not only make a great film, but have it seen by the Canadian public?
11. What was the last Canadian film you saw? The last doc?

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

SIGNATURE

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at areid@alcor.concordia.ca.

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