Canadian Political Storytelling: Back to a Future?
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Abstract
This paper examines English language or bilingual screen narratives (film and television series) dealing with the public sphere produced in Canada since 1960. Forty-nine texts were analysed including docudramas such as biopics about political leaders, documentaries, films on women in politics, and films on First Nations politics. Applying Borins and Herst’s four-quadrant model of political fables, most instantiate the heroic fable except films on women and First Nations. Conditions of production, including the influence of US films and television series, as well as the limitations of public-sector funding through the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and National Film Board (NFB) are also discussed. This paper illustrates how the evolving transnational entertainment economy constrains cultural producers working within traditional creative and industrial modes of production while simultaneously offering opportunities to invent (or reinvent) alternatives. The paper concludes that enhanced arm’s-length funding for documentaries represents the best way to ensure a vibrant future for this genre of narrative in Canada.

Introduction

In his 2018 study The Political Effects of Entertainment Media, Anthony Gierzynski employs the useful catch-all term “politically relevant narrative” to denote screen media texts that engage with either electoral politics and governance or with contemporary or historical events, issues, and themes that are politically salient: racism, gender justice, social inequality, corporate malfeasance, climate justice. In the past two decades, the US and UK have produced large numbers of high-profile
politically relevant screen stories through a range of distribution modalities: cinematic, broadcast and subscription television, and, increasingly, digital streaming. In comparison, Canada’s output has been extremely limited, even adjusting for the differences of scale of both audience and industry factors. Looking back farther the record can most charitably be described as uneven: award-winning documentary with limited distribution and viewership, occasional large-budget politically relevant dramatic productions meeting with mixed critical/popular success, numerous failed politics-adjacent episodic comedies, most cancelled after a single season, some not even lasting that long. The only consistent bright spot: non-narrative, topical political sketch comedy, which necessarily has a very short shelf-life. And this was before the internet transformed the entertainment media ecosystem. Given past history and the accelerating rate of technological change and industry realignment, two questions arise: Is there a future for Canadian screen stories that engage with the Canadian public sphere in the new, transnational digital media economy? And does it even matter?

The questions feel particularly resonant now. The COVID19 pandemic has invested issues of governance, leadership, transparency, and accountability with life-or-death urgency for Canadians. No less profoundly, longstanding narratives of national identity are being challenged by the ongoing revelations of thousands of unmarked graves on the grounds of Indigenous residential schools and the impact of these schools on generations of Indigenous Canadians. Widely reported allegations of systemic racism, homophobia, and sexism afflicting institutions like the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and local law enforcement are increasingly frequent. Statues and memorials are literal sites of

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1 Successful political sketch comedies include the CBC’s *The Royal Canadian Air Farce*, *Rick Mercer Report*, and *This Hour has Twenty-Two Minutes*. The CBC has also had notable successes with family/community centred episodic comedies: *Little Mosque on the Prairies*, *Kim’s Convenience*, and the multi-award winning *Schitt’s Creek*. 
contestation in Canada as elsewhere. Historical legacies are being questioned and public buildings renamed. What memory studies calls “public memory” – the common pool of stories and figures of memory circulating within a culture (Rigney 2016) – is being transformed in real time. As a nation, Canadians are grappling with the most fundamental issues of representation, both political and cultural: Who is seen? Who is heard? Whose stories matter?

At the same time, social media affordances are changing the forms and meanings of political engagement and activism for successive cohorts of young people. And within the discipline of political science, a growing body of scholarship is taking as axiomatic the central role played by affect/emotion in motivating political opinion, partisanship, and participation (Neuman et al 2007, Slaby and von Schlave 2019). Within the past decade, theorization of an affective/emotional public sphere has emerged as a necessary supplement – or perhaps corrective – to the rationalist, deliberative models associated with Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls among others (Rosas and Serrano-Puche 2018; Krause 2008). How we as citizens understand and act within the public sphere is inextricably bound up with how we feel about it. And those feelings are often shaped by the popular cultural narratives that re-present that public sphere to us in the form of immersive, multi-sensory screen texts. These are the representations that “transfer” most, functioning in the words of the film scholar Carl Plantinga (2018) as “sociopolitical templates” or, as the cultural historian Alison Landsberg has it, “prosthetic memories,” personally felt public memories that constitute new forms of felt knowledge and new bases for political action and allegiance (Landsberg 2005, 2015). The answer to the second question, then, is yes, it does matter that we as Canadians produce and engage with politically relevant screen narratives, since these inevitably and profoundly shape the ways we, as citizens, perceive, respond to, imagine, and engage with the Canadian public sphere. The answer to the first is more qualified. Is there a future for politically relevant
Canadian screen narrative in the new transnational media environment? Yes, but. The remainder of this article seeks to substantiate that qualification.

This study of Canadian political storytelling demonstrates the approach *New Area Studies* is pursuing (Hodgett and Smith 2020), especially the importance given to transnational and interdisciplinary perspectives. Canada’s most significant external political influence has been the UK: Canada achieved nationhood in 1867 but required more than a century to gain full political autonomy from its mother country. Since its inception, Canada has been strongly influenced by the US economy and culture, and its presence is strongly felt in Canadians’ daily lives. Transnational issues of gender equality and representation and the relationship between indigenous and settler society manifest themselves in distinctively Canadian ways as a result of the nation’s unique historical, geographical, economic and cultural positioning both intracontinentally and transatlantically.

**The Data Set**

It is possible that one way forward for Canadian political storytellers lies in a (partial) reinvention of the past. And it is the configuration of that past, and the factors that determined it, that receives most of our attention here. The research for this article involved assembling a data set of films and television series engaging with the Canadian public sphere produced since 1960, with the object of identifying significant patterns in conditions of production/distribution, genre, and thematic and narrative structures. The basic test for inclusion, as in Borins and Herst’s 2011 study of public sphere narratives in the US and UK, was a focus on both an organization, institution, or process operating within the public sphere and an individual protagonist or group of protagonists functioning as primary agent(s) within the narrative of events.² There

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² This measure was devised as an application of the psychologist Raymond Marr’s definition of a crafted narrative: “the description of a series of actions and events that unfold over time, according to causal principles … driven by the intentional behaviour of one or more autonomous agents in a
was, necessarily, subjective judgment involved. Research assistants conducted fine-grained internet searches and scanned the archives and catalogues of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the National Film Board (NFB), searching a range of politically relevant terms and themes. The NFB was a particularly fruitful source, returning more than 100 politically relevant texts, the vast majority documentaries, with a small sampling of docudramas (notably, a 17-part series of half-hour films made in the early 1960s dramatizing the lives of the colonial-era politicians known as the “Fathers of Confederation”). Given the large number of NFB productions identified, a thematically representative sample was created for close analysis for the purposes of this article. French-language texts produced for Quebecois audiences and neither subtitled nor dubbed were not included, for example the television series *Monsieur le Ministre* (1982-86) on Radio-Canada, the French-language arm of the CBC, and the network’s 1978 eponymous docudrama about Maurice Duplessis, premier of Quebec from 1936 to 1939 and 1944 to 1959). A comparative analysis of French and English Canadian political screen narratives would be a fascinating, but separate, study. Three films originally conceived for Quebecois audiences but also subtitled are considered here: Michel Brault’s *Les Ordres* (1974), Denys Arcand’s *Le Confort et l’Indifference* (1982), and Félix Rose’s *Les Rose* (2020), all of which deal with nationally significant issues and events, namely Separatism, the October Crisis, and the 1980 referendum.³

³ Quebec nationalism in the Sixties gave rise to a democratic separatist party – the Parti Quebecois (PQ) – as well as a terrorist faction, the Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ). In October 1970, FLQ members kidnapped British diplomat James Cross and Quebec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte and murdered Laporte. A key element of the October Crisis was the imposition of martial law (the War Measures Act) by the federal government. The PQ was elected as the provincial government in Quebec in 1976 and held a referendum in 1980 in which 60 percent of the Quebec electorate rejected the PQ’s proposal for Quebec sovereignty.
The CBC’s most significant recent contributions to the corpus were six high-budget, high-profile docudramas produced between 1988 and 2013 which will be the focus of our analysis, and eight cancelled episodic comedies in which politics and governance are material for predictable caricature and farce. The serial failure of the episodic comedies is more salient to our analysis than any one of the series themselves and we will not be considering these further. The CBC also produced one limited (6 episode) adaptation of the Canadian novelist Terry Fallis’s well-received satirical political novels *The Best Laid Plans* and *The High Road* (broadcast in 2013). To avoid criticism by the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper (2006 to 2015) that had already inflicted major cuts to its budget, the CBC adaptation substituted farce for Fallis’s satirical bite, erasing all mention of actual political parties, ideologies, or policies. (In the source novels, while not all Liberal politicians are idealists, all the idealistic politicians are Liberals.) The broadcaster did have an early (1965-69) dramatic success with the series *Quentin Durgens, MP* which chronicled the political education of a neophyte government back bencher. The series was well-received by critics and is notable now as the launch of the iconic Canadian actor Gordon Pinsent’s career. It remains the CBC’s sole successful, multi-season foray into episodic political drama. Only one original production from the Aboriginal People’s Television Network was included in our set, *Blackstone* (2011-15), a drama centered on life on the fictional reserve of the title which gave ongoing narrative attention to the struggles and failures of three successive band chiefs. Arguably, any of the original narrative programming produced by APTN is politically relevant. While the reach of the network is still relatively limited beyond Indigenous viewers, and its output of originally produced narrative programs (as opposed to news, sports, current events, cultural and children’s programming) still quite small, its recent launch of a streaming service, APTN Lumi, in September 2019 and its multiple partnerships with other Indigenous cultural producers internationally holds enormous promise for the future.
Because the narratives we are considering here are defined by the public/political context of their protagonist(s)’s personal story, we take them to be structured by the relations of two axes of emplotment and signification: the public/political and the personal. For the purposes of taxonomy, this generates four possible basic narrative outcomes for our texts, determined by the alignment or misalignment of the two axes: the narrative outcome is positive for both public and protagonist(s); the narrative outcome is positive for the public, but negative for the protagonist(s); the narrative outcome is negative for the public, but positive for the protagonist(s); and the narrative outcome is negative for both public and protagonist(s). Borins and Herst’s earlier study Governing Fables (2011) termed these basic structures “fables,” labeling the four possibilities as, respectively, heroic (positive/positive); sacrificial (positive/negative); ironic (negative/positive); and tragic/satiric (negative/negative). It then considered how clusters of texts from the US and UK instantiated these fables through recurring formal and thematic elements. Of course, narrative outcomes are often much less clear-cut than this schematic taxonomy suggests. Our interest lies in the finer-grained analysis of the ways in which individual texts, or clusters of texts, shade these black-and-white categories, generating a wide range of ambiguous grays and ambivalent or shifting viewer allegiances and alignments.

**Not So Arms Length: Conditions of Production**

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the screen narratives analyzed in this article. Of the 49 texts considered in detail, 26 are documentaries, 14 either drama or docudrama (that is based on current or historical events or personalities), and 9 are episodic comedies with limited or truncated runs. Of the 49, 26 were produced by the NFB, 17 by the CBC, and 2 were NFB-CBC co-productions. If we include the specialist public service broadcaster APTN, it is clear that politically relevant Canadian screen narrative has relied on public funding for its existence (both “independent” productions also received significant public investment). Unlike the US, where commercial producers have been making a steady stream of successful politically
relevant cinematic films like *Lincoln*, *Selma*, *Hidden Figures*, *BlacKkKlansman*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Standard Operating Procedure*, as well as broadcast television, cable, and streaming series like *Parks and Rec*, *Madam Secretary*, *Veep*, and *House of Cards*, Canadian creators’ only sources of production funding and distribution for politically relevant Canadian screen narratives have been government funded cultural entities. And this has had significant implications for both the creators and their texts.

The Broadcasting Act of 1991 gives the CBC, as the national public broadcaster, an ambitious – arguably contradictory – mandate that includes producing programming that “informs, enlightens, and entertains,” that is “predominantly and distinctively Canadian,” that “reflects the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada,” and that “contribute[s] to shared national consciousness and identity” (Statutes of Canada 1991, Chapter 11, Sections 3.1.l and 3.1.m). Under successive federal governments, both Conservative and Liberal, the CBC has also been expected to generate significant advertising and licensing revenue. The CBC received $1.2 billion from the federal government in 2020 and generated $500 million in advertising and other revenues. The CBC’s Annual Report for 2018-2019 notes an “ongoing” investment of $92 million

| Table 1. Politically Relevant Canadian Screen Texts by Genre and Producer |
|---------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------|------------------|
| N=49                            | Drama  | Docudrama | Documentary | Episodic Comedy |
| CBC                             | 1      | 6+1 (opera) | 1          | 8 (cancelled)    |
| NFB                             |        | 3        | 23         |                  |
| CBC-NFB Coproduction            |        | 1        | 1          |                  |
| Private Broadcaster             |        | 1        | 1          |                  |
| Specialist PSB (APTN)           | 1      |          |            |                  |
| Independent                     |        | 1        | 1          |                  |

Source: Classification by authors.
in original content development though it is unclear how much of this is for original dramatic or documentary programming.⁴

The NFB is an agency of the federal government under the Department of Canadian Heritage and is described on the Government of Canada’s website as “Canada’s public producer and distributor”, with a mandate to “create, produce, and distribute distinctive and original audiovisual works that reflect the diverse realities and perspectives of Canadians, and to share these works with the people of Canada and the rest of the world.”⁵ It was established in 1939, primarily as a source of propaganda films. After World War Two, it turned to animation, documentaries, and public service films. Since then, the NFB has gained an international reputation for its innovative animation and documentary filmmaking and, more recently, interactive digital media productions, regularly winning prestigious awards in all three domains. The CBC buys and broadcasts NFB productions and the two institutions occasionally co-produce documentaries. In the 1960s and 70s, the NFB was employing filmmakers and camera crews as salaried employees, facilitating its preferred house form of responsive, “direct cinema” documentary: filming public events as they unfold using the smallest cameras possible and shooting in closeup. The NFB’s budget peaked at $130 million (in 2020 dollars) in the early 1990s. Its budget was cut by both the Liberal Chretien Government’s Program Review and by the Harper Government, so that by 2020 it was 40 percent less than at its peak and the NFB could no longer afford to employ either filmmakers or camera crews full-time (Druick 2007).⁶

⁶ To deal with a huge structural deficit that was a major concern to global capital markets, in 1994-95 Chretien’s government launched a comprehensive review of all federal spending and made major cuts to many programs, ultimately eliminating the deficit.
It is not only government mandates, insecure public funding, and limited distribution options that constrain Canadian creators of politically relevant narratives. According to Wayne Grigsby, a veteran Canadian producer and the writer or co-writer of three of the CBC docudramas we are considering here, Trudeau, Trudeau: Maverick in the Making, and October 1970, as publicly funded productions these narratives are scrutinized for political bias in ways commercial productions simply are not (Grigsby 2020), frequently finding themselves under attack from both left and right. Conservatives, and conservatives, generally regard both the NFB and the CBC, reliant as they are on public funding rather than private capitalization, as left-leaning by definition and therefore implicitly Liberal in orientation, while Liberals and Conservatives both have long viewed Radio Canada as sympathetic to separatism. Of course, accusations of partisanship, bias, and even disloyalty become still more of an issue when the screen narrative is a docudrama centering on a Canadian cultural icon. The NFB funded docudrama The Kid Who Couldn’t Miss caused a political furor in 1984 with its suggestion that World War I fighter ace Billy Bishop had falsified (or fabricated) his account of the solo attack on a German aerodrome which had won him the Victoria Cross. The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology launched an investigation in 1985 and both the film’s director, Paul Cowan, and the NFB’s Commissioner, Francois Macerola, were summoned to appear. Cowan recalled in a 2002 interview that “four or five hundred articles were written about it in the press” and that his wife feared “our house was going to get fire-bombed” (Alioff 2002).

Finally, there is the intractable geographic and economic reality that creators of politically relevant Canadian screen narratives are “operating within a small market nation that is situated next to the world’s largest cultural superpower” (Tinic 2009, 66). According to a recent study, in 2007 the US accounted for an estimated 76 percent of all finished screen programs exported worldwide (as opposed to licensed program formats), with the United Kingdom following with 7 percent (Hilmes et al
2019, 7). Both US and UK exports suffer no audience discount in what media scholars call “cultural proximity” for anglophone Canadian viewers (Pearson 2019, 116). In fact, their non-Canadian origins typically invest them with a “cultural premium”, whether of quality or “cult” appeal. According to the 2012 memoir Tower of Babble by a former Executive Vice President for English Language Programming at the CBC, Richard Stursberg, English Canada is unique in the industrialized world in strongly preferring the television entertainment programs of another country – the US – to its own (Stursberg 2012, 1-3). Stursberg was writing in the era of premium subscription cable, that is before the explosion of digital streaming services. Canadian viewers now have infinitely more non-Canadian options to prefer and many more ways to access them.

**Qualified Heroism and Mixed Response: Canadian Political Docudrama 1981-2013**

Between 2002 and 2006 the CBC produced and aired five political docudramas, four of them focusing, as their titles indicate, on a single, central political leader as protagonist: Trudeau (2002), Trudeau: Maverick in the Making (2005), October 1970 (2006), Rene Levesque (2006) and Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story (2006). A sixth biopic followed a hiatus of seven years, Jack (2013), a depiction of the political career and early death of the New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jack Layton.7 Trinidad attracted a huge (for Canadian television) audience of two million, as well as uniformly positive reviews from television critics, which likely explains the cluster of productions that followed.8 Prairie Giant and Trudeau: Maverick in the Making,

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7 The NDP is a democratic socialist party. Layton, who began his career in municipal politics in Toronto, led the federal NDP from 2003 to 2011. In the 2011 election, it became the Official Opposition for the first time in its history. Layton died of cancer shortly after the 2011 election.

8 Conservative political columnists Robert Fulford (2002) and David Frum (2011) dissented, complaining that Trudeau entirely ignored what they considered to be failed economic policies in its desire to mythologize Canada's best-known prime minister. In screenwriter Wayne Grigsby’s defense, it is hard to make prime-time drama out of the details of wage and price controls and the formulation of a national energy policy.
attracted smaller but still very respectable audiences of 800,000 and 500,000 respectively.

These slickly produced, high-gloss political docudramas based on recent Canadian history might seem like ideal flagship programming for Canada’s national broadcaster. Richard Stursberg, who assumed his position as head of English language programming in 2004, was skeptical. He noted in his memoir that the ratings for *Trudeau* were highest for episodes dealing with Trudeau’s headline stealing marital woes, dropping off when the narrative focus shifted to the arcana of constitutional negotiation however skillfully dramatized (2012, 112). Stursberg confirmed his own prophecy regarding the limited audience appeal of politically relevant drama by scheduling the Rene Levesque mini-series, already in production when he assumed his role, during the summer viewing doldrums. Not surprisingly, it failed to find a significant audience. Stursberg’s preferred alternative to the political docudramas was political comic opera and he commissioned two: one about Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984 to 1993), the other about Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien (1993-2003), both to be shown on Sunday night prime time. This undeniably “out of the box” idea likely contributed to Stursberg’s firing in 2010. The Chretien project was cancelled before any work began, but *Mulroney: The Opera* was completed. It was screened in Canadian cinemas on two weekends in April 2011. Though several foreign national broadcasters screened the production (Finland, Sweden, and Estonia), apparently seeing in it a universal cautionary tale of overweening ambition and inevitable corruption, it was never aired by the CBC which went to considerable lengths to disavow any association with the project (Weinstein 2020). Stursberg may have felt vindicated by the critical response to *Jack* which was lukewarm, most reviewers feeling the filmmakers substituted hagiography for insight, entirely failing to capture the ambition, calculation, and drive of the late politician. Although this article focuses primarily on the NFB’s documentary films, the NFB did coproduce a television docudrama with the CBC on the life of Canada’s longest-serving prime
minister, Mackenzie King (1921-1930, 1935-48), *The King Chronicles*, directed by the renowned NFB documentarist Donald Brittain. Broadcast in 1988, the six-hour drama did not look or sound much like its brightly lit, fast paced successors. Its most unusual feature was the aural presence of Brittain himself as narrator, commenting acerbically and explicitly on the personal and ideological shortcomings being dramatized. (Given Brittain’s stature within Canadian filmmaking, this was, indeed, “Voice-of-God” narration.)

The most significant docudrama within this set almost wasn’t made. Fourteen years before the King co-production, the Commissioner of the NFB had vetoed Quebecois filmmaker Michel Brault’s proposal for a drama exploring the experience of the 450 people arrested and detained without charge under the War Measures Act during the October Crisis of 1970 (Evans 1991, 186). Brault, who was then on staff at the NFB, was able to raise independent funding – ironically, in part from the Canadian Film Development Corporation, another government agency. His film, titled *Les Ordres*, was released in 1975. Using five composite characters, a script based on interviews with detainees, a hand-held camera, and extreme close-ups, Brault effectively recreated the characteristic NFB “direct cinema” aesthetic and *Les Ordres* would go on to win multiple Canadian Film Awards. It also shared an award at the Cannes Festival in 1975 and was screened there again as part of the “Cannes Classics” program in 2015. It has been featured on all four of the Toronto International Film Festivals lists of “Top Ten Canadian Films of All Time” published roughly every decade (1984, 1993, 2004, 2015).^9

*Escape from Iran: The Canadian Caper*, was produced by the private broadcaster CTV in 1981, with investment from the Canadian Film Development Corporation. It is the only one of the docudramas in this set to be aired on a commercial network. The film

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recounts the events surrounding the then-recent rescue of six American diplomats who were given refuge in the Canadian embassy in Tehran for 84 days after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Based on a book by journalists Jean Pelletier and Claude Adams (1981), the film is a sober and factual account (relative to the information then publicly available) of the quiet heroism of Canadian Ambassador Ken Taylor (a now middle-aged Gordon Pinsent) as he sheltered his “houseguests” from the increasingly suspicious Iranian authorities while desperately urging his superiors in Ottawa to act. This is national hero as middle manager, caught between a front-line crisis and a head office that is dragging its feet. Thirty years later, after the declassification of CIA documents relating to the escape, the American actor Ben Affleck directed and starred in Argo, an Oscar-winning reimagining of the episode that bears little resemblance to the Canadian version. In his commercially successful, highly fictionalized big-budget (65 million 2020 Canadian dollars) cinematic feature, it is the CIA operative Tony Mendez (played by Affleck) who is the mastermind of the operation which now culminates in an entirely fictional airport chase scene as machine-gun wielding Revolutionary Guards race their jeeps onto the tarmac. Taylor is reduced to little more than a deeply concerned (and very polite) onlooker with – to American ears – idiosyncratic vowels. In fact, Mendez spent a total of two days in Tehran at the end of the Americans’ ordeal.

Figure 1 categorizes seven of these nine docudramas as being structured by the heroic fable, that is, we consider all seven to be narratives in which the public and the personal plot trajectories align and both resolve at a point of narratively endorsed positive change and/or achievement. Heroic, however, is a structural descriptor and it does not capture the variety of ways in which five of the seven texts shadow and complicate either the personal story, the public achievement, or both. Only two are unreservedly celebratory (Prairie Giant and October 1970) and both generated controversy and criticism that largely overshadowed the productions themselves. In fact, in the case of Prairie Giant, the narrative sleight of hand employed to beatify its
protagonist effectively ended the film’s broadcast life. *Trudeau* and *Trudeau: Maverick in the Making* dramatize the brilliance and charisma, the vision and audacity of their complicated subject, but give full narrative measure to the cruelty and coldness of the older man and the dilettantism and self-indulgence of the younger. If *Trudeau: Maverick in the Making* ends with the promise of the maverick’s meteoric political career to come, *Trudeau’s* concluding scenes juxtapose the incomplete and painfully won political victory of the patriation of the Canadian constitution with a partial marital reconciliation most viewers would know was doomed: two solitudes indeed. *Rene Levesque* celebrates its subject’s public accomplishments as journalist, leader of the Parti Quebecois from 1968 to 1985, and premier of Quebec from 1976 to 1985, as well as his singular and principled vision of a democratic sovereignty movement fully supportive of minority rights, and his utter rejection of the violence of the FLQ. But the film is also unsparing in its depiction of Levesque’s private miseries and self-inflicted wounds: the loveless marriage and impossibility of divorce, the serial adulteries, the complete indifference to his family’s financial security, and the almost suicidal disregard for his own health.

Only *Prairie Giant* and *October 1970* present their protagonists as unproblematic foci of audience allegiance. And both became the subjects of controversy for doing so. *Prairie Giant* is unreservedly celebratory, mythologizing Douglas’s evolution from rural pastor to transformational premier of Saskatchewan from 1944 to 1961 and

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<th>Public Outcome: Negative</th>
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<td><em>Les Ordres</em></td>
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Source: classification by authors.
visionary crusader for the health of ordinary Canadians through the creation of public health insurance. To do so, screenwriter Bruce Smith entirely elides Douglas’s failed leadership of the federal NDP from 1961 to 1971 and, much more consequentially, materially falsifies the character and role of Jimmy Gardiner, Liberal premier of Saskatchewan from 1926 to 1929 and 1934 to 1935 as well as federal Minister of Agriculture from 1935 to 1957. Gardiner becomes the narrative foil to the saintly Douglas, establishment villain to his populist hero. Following the docudrama’s first national broadcast in March 2006, historians and members of Gardiner’s family went public with their condemnation, demanding public corrections (Mandryk 2006). Gardiner’s granddaughter, Marg, with the support of the provincial opposition Saskatchewan Party, noted numerous factual errors, including depicting Gardiner as premier in 1931 (he wasn’t), as denouncing the striking miners in Estevan, Saskatchewan as Communists and undesirable immigrants in an inflammatory province-wide radio address (he didn’t), and as cosily sharing a whiskey with the press gallery (he was teetotal). For her part, Tommy Douglas’s daughter Shirley was incensed at the narrative’s omission of Douglas’s public opposition to the imposition of the War Measures Act in October 1970, an indisputable act of political courage for which Douglas was widely condemned at the time. In response to the controversy, the CBC – at the direction of Richard Stursberg – appointed an independent historian to review the film, issued an apology to the Gardiner family, and canceled all future repeat broadcasts (Ross 2006).

Twenty years before that ill-fated first broadcast, Elise Swerhone and Donald Brittain produced an NFB documentary, *Tommy Douglas: Keeper of the Flame*, which manages to do in 57 minutes what *Prairie Giant* fails to do in three hours. The film offers a nuanced account of Douglas’s political trajectory, making the point that the former pastor was “hard to package” for television, in contrast to the unfailingly charismatic, epigrammatic Trudeau. Douglas’s principled opposition to the invocation of the War Measures Act is addressed, as are his struggles as leader of the federal NDP. It is a
careful, considered representation of a political career motivated by conviction, and marked by failures as well as triumphs, creating a narrative comfortable with complexity, both political and personal.

October 1970 centres its narrative reading of the October Crisis not on the primary public actors, the politicians, the hostages, the kidnappers, but on Julien Giguere, the lieutenant-detective in charge of Montreal’s anti-terrorism unit, like Ken Taylor a middle-manager struggling to resolve a crisis. Giguere is depicted as the archetypal (cinematic) good cop. He is tough but fair, determined to rescue the hostages by whatever means necessary, yet refusing to ride roughshod over the civil rights of those caught in the investigation. Curbing the excesses of his own officers, he limits indiscriminate arrests despite the unprecedented powers brought to bear by panicked politicians. He is a beacon of democracy and resolve in a time of moral and national crisis. Despite the genre appeal of the police procedural narrative structure, and the smouldering good looks of lead actor Patrick Labbe, October 1970 averaged a disappointing viewership of 100,000 in its eight episodes. It did, however, attract considerable hostile press coverage for what was perceived as serious mischaracterization of the real Giguere’s handling of the crisis and the heavy reliance on cop drama cliches. The fact that all of the Quebec separatists spoke entirely in English did not pass unnoticed either. Co-writer Wayne Grigsby blames the disappointing performance on Richard Stursberg’s decision to schedule the mini-series against the popular US medical drama Grey’s Anatomy (2020). An article in Le Devoir, Quebec’s newspaper of record, published in advance of the series’ broadcast in Quebec

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10 After its English language broadcast, Quebecois novelist and journalist Louis Hamelin published a long analysis piece in Le Devoir offering a sustained critique, claiming Giguere made numerous mistakes throughout, including ignoring important evidence, and noting that after the Crisis he led operations to infiltrate the FLQ that resulted in a number of avoidable deaths (Hamelin 2006). Hamelin’s Giguere could obviously have been the protagonist of a much more complex and morally challenging narrative. And Hamelin would publish a prize-winning novel based on the Crisis in 2010, La Constellation du Lynx, translated by Grigsby and published in 2013 under the title October 1970.

It is possible to reach back to literary scholar Linda Hutcheon’s classic work *Splitting Images: Contemporary Canadian Ironies* (1991) to account for the narrative and critical preference for complex political protagonists who achieve the muted or partial triumphs we have been charting. Hutcheon’s construction of Canadian culture as “particularly fertile ground for the cultivating of doubleness” (p. 15), extends her understanding of irony to include a paradoxical (ironic?) insistence on ambivalence and ambiguity, what she calls “subversive double-voicing” (17). For Hutcheon this has a consistently political implication, which she literalizes with an injunction to “think of the difference between the responses in French and English to questions in the House of Commons by linguistically adept parliamentarians – and prime ministers” (17). (Hutcheon’s irony should not be confused with our use of the label ironic for the negative public/positive personal fable structure, though both clearly draw on implications of divergence and contradiction.)

Hutcheon’s thesis concerning Canadian literary and artistic producers’ “particular -- and I think frequent-- conjunction of irony and politics” (viii) was formulated at the height of academic engagement with theories of postmodernism and deconstruction. For Hutcheon, the ironic stance is valorized as a manifestation of the larger deconstructive project to challenge “master” narratives and the structures of power they legitimate. But the narratives of qualified political heroism and agency we are considering may equally speak to the influence of specific political realities and production conditions. For a publicly funded broadcaster, there is an obvious functional value to a qualified narrative stance: it may serve as the best defense against accusations of political bias or partisanship. Creators of docudramas, biopics,
even entirely fictional historical narratives always run the risk of accusations of factual error, inaccuracy, or misrepresentation. Artistic exigencies inevitably demand narrative omissions, simplifications, conflations of events and actors, as well as numerous exercises of creative license. And commercial producers of such texts may face negative press coverage, public corrections from professional experts, outrage from individuals or communities with a personal stake, even an occasional lawsuit, disclaimers notwithstanding. Charges of political bias, however, hold very few terrors for them. For a publicly funded government agency the consequences can be both more punitive and longer lasting. Given production schedules, the party in power can easily change between commission and broadcast of a particular project, making the avoidance of any appearance of bias still more necessary. If Canada’s public broadcaster was going to produce politically relevant docudrama – and as we have seen, in Canada, very few other entities did – the safest institutional course was clearly to avoid extremes of either mythologizing or vilification, substituting instead flawed protagonists and shadowed resolutions. It could, indeed, prove a condition of survival for individual productions, as the fates of *Prairie Giant* and *Mulroney: The Opera* make clear.

It is also worth noting that during the period covered by this article, Canada experienced seven of its fourteen federal minority governments to date, familiarizing Canadians with a template of electoral narratives that remain in a sense open, inconclusive, lacking the emotionally satisfying closure of clear “winners” and “losers,” triumphs and defeats. And acclimatizing Canadian voters as well to the messy political manoeuvring and inevitable policy compromises that the lack of a parliamentary majority entails. This feature of Canada’s recent political history is very different from that of the US, of course, and also of the UK, which has rarely experienced minority governments in recent decades. And this may have helped to foster a greater comfort with – even expectation of – a more complex and more
tempered vision of politics, governance, the individuals who engage in them, and the narrative arcs they generate.

**Activist Documentary: The “Indian Film Crew” and Studio D**

As we noted at the outset, almost half (24 of 49) of the screen narratives analyzed here are documentaries produced by the National Film Board, recalling that this subset was generated by selecting from more than 100 politically relevant NFB productions identified in an initial sweep. Figure 2 charts the breakdown of this documentary subset according to fable type: eleven instantiate a version of the heroic fable, nine offer variations of the tragic/satiric fable, while the remaining four are structured by the sacrificial fable. This contrasts with the dominance of a heroic fable structure in the much smaller set of docudramas. Table 2 provides an implicit explanation for this difference by introducing an additional set of categories, breaking down the sample of NFB documentaries according to what we are calling their thematic political orientation. “Conventional” denotes narratives representing dominant (establishment) politics through representations of white, male agents (typically though not exclusively professional politicians) operating within, if not at the head of, provincial or national governmental structures and engaging with events of national political significance: constitutional negotiations, election campaigns, security crises. Two other categories identify documentaries that explicitly propose an alternative political focus with narratives centred on either First Nations or female protagonists acting within the public sphere.
Figure 2. NFB Documentaries (Selected Sample) by Fable Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Outcome: Positive</th>
<th>Protagonist Outcome: Positive</th>
<th>Protagonist Outcome: Negative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heroic</strong></td>
<td>The Champions (C)</td>
<td>Flora: Scenes from a Leadership Convention (W)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Art of the Possible (C)</td>
<td>The Right Candidate for Rosedale (W)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Die (C)</td>
<td>Why Women Run (W)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Road to Patriation (C)</td>
<td>Les Rose/The Rose Family (C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tommy Douglas: Keeper of the Flame (C)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love Affair with Politics: A Portrait of Marion Dewar (W)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wendy Lil: A Playwright in Politics (W)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honour of the Crown (FN)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nothing Sacred (C)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danny (C)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michaelle Jean: A Woman of Purpose (W)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Outcome: Negative</th>
<th>Ironic</th>
<th>Tragic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Other Side of the Ledger (FN)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>You Are on Indian Land (FN)</td>
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<td>Incident at Restigouche (FN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dancing Around the Table (FN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kahnesatake: 270 Years of Resistance (FN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Turning Back (FN)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim Campbell: Through the Looking Glass (W)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action: The October Crisis of 1970 (C)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satiric</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Comfort and Indifference (C)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Letters in parenthesis indicate thematic political orientation:

C = Conventional; FN = First Nations; W = Women

Source: classification by authors.
Table 2. NFB Documentary (Selected Sample) by Thematic Political Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>First Nations</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Danny</em> (2014)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Les Rose/The Rose Family</em> (2020)</td>
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N = 24

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<tr>
<th>NFB Documentaries by Thematic Political Orientation and Fable Type.</th>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrificial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragic/Satiric</td>
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<tr>
<td>/N</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: classification by authors.
As we argued in reference to the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, there is a profound sense in which all NFB documentaries representing either the historical or contemporary experience of Indigenous or women protagonists are political in the most fundamental meaning of the term, given the relations of both groups to structures of economic, legal, electoral, and cultural power. To facilitate more meaningful comparison with the fable structures of both the docudrama and “conventional” documentary subsets, however, we have restricted our sample to First Nations/women-centred texts that also engage with some dimension of the machinery of conventional political activity or governance. Unsurprisingly, ten of these fourteen films offer outcomes that are primarily or entirely negative (lost election or leadership contests, abortive tenures, failed and/or bad faith negotiations, communities awaiting justice). Only two of the women-centred films are largely celebratory (the portraits of Ottawa Mayor Marion Dewar and Governor-General Michélle Jean, the latter a valentine directed by Jean’s husband). A single Indigenous-centred text (Honour of the Crown) – written and directed, it should be noted, by a non-First Nations filmmaker - - offers a positive narrative resolution, though a resolution presented as the culmination of a hundred-year-long struggle.

We categorize ten of the 24 documentaries as “conventional” in their thematic orientation. Of these, five centre on individual politicians who are heads of government: Bill Davis, Premier of Ontario from 1971 to 1985 (The Art of the Possible); Rene Levesque and Pierre Trudeau (The Champions); John Diefenbaker, Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963 (Dief); Saskatchewan Premier Tommy Douglas (Keeper of the Flame); and Danny Williams, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador from 2003 to 2010 (Danny). The exemplary narrative here is Peter Raymont’s The Art of the Possible (1978) which captures Bill Davis in (relative) action as the head of a minority government. Impassively smoking his ubiquitous pipe, Davis spends much of his screen time listening inscrutably to often disparate points of view as a throne speech and budget are debated and decided. The “climax” comes when – in Davis's own
words – he finds “a middle ground that is reasonably acceptable to the public.” In contrast to the stolid Davis, Danny Williams is urgent, energetic, entirely mission-driven, and unapologetically confrontational in his negotiations with the federal government over the sharing of resource revenues. These are narratives of very different, but equally effective, political practitioners engaging in the business of governance. They are heroic in structural terms but not mythologizing in narrative stance, and more interested in process than personality (or its deliberately cultivated lack). This is in contrast to *Dief* and *The Champions*. The former is all personality and no process, an extended eulogy for “The Chief,” while the latter, infinitely more nuanced narratively and politically, uses the intertwined personal histories of Trudeau and Levesque, rival political siblings, to document the public history of Quebecois nationalism.

Two more of the “conventional” political documentaries address aspects of the October Crisis, though from very different points in time and, necessarily, perspectives. In both instances, “conventional” refers to the framing public events, though the deeply personal point of view of *Les Rose* stands in stark contrast to the much more traditional omniscient documentary style of the earlier film. *Action: The October Crisis of 1970* was produced in the immediate aftermath of the Crisis, using contemporary news footage and other public record sources to document what the director Robin Spry’s concluding voice-over calls “a sad and costly loss of innocence” for the country. Spry’s original script followed this with the dangling query “and the question remains: Will Quebec separate?” According to Gary Evans’s exhaustive history of the NFB, then-Commissioner Sydney Newman, acting out of an abundance of bureaucratic caution, “persuaded” the filmmaker to excise the open question (Evans 1991, 189-90). The documentary makes haunting viewing today, conveying both the trauma of the Crisis as it unfolded, and the national mood of shocked and sombre unease of its aftermath.
Produced fifty years after the Crisis, *Les Rose/The Rose Family* is a determinedly personal investigation by Félix Rose, the son and nephew of FLQ activists Paul and Jacques Rose. Members of the cell that kidnapped and murdered Quebec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte, Paul and Jacques served lengthy prison terms. (Félix was born after his father’s release.) The film is an extended attempt to reconcile the gentle social activist father Félix remembers – a presence movingly conjured through home-movie footage – with the violent revolutionary of fifty years before. A feature article in the English Canadian newspaper of record *The Globe and Mail* published on October 26, 2020, describes the film as “a minor box office success” in Quebec, but notes the extensive attention it received from political and cultural commentators. Their responses predictably divided along linguistic lines, with Francophone media embracing the narrative’s representation of the Crisis as a family drama, and Anglophone commentators condemning the film as an extended exercise in extenuation, special pleading, and denial (Andrew-Gee 2020).

The final “conventional” text we considered, *The Road to Patriation* documents the long and agonizing constitutional negotiations that culminate in the film’s concluding scene of political pageantry: the signing by the Queen of the Constitution Act on Parliament Hill on April 17, 1982. While the film’s narration and soundtrack are occasionally surprisingly irreverent, the narrative focus remains, conventionally, on the usual cast of public players: politicians, constitutional lawyers, lobbyists, journalists, the Queen.

The fourteen “alternative” documentaries within the set are divided equally between First Nations and women-centred political narratives. Six of the seven First Nations-centred films feature collective protagonists, whether delegated representatives (*Dancing Around the Table*), groups of organized protestors (*You Are on Indian Land*, *The Canadian Parliament’s Constitution Act replaced the British Parliament’s British North America Act (1867) as Canada’s constitution.*

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Kahnéatsá: 270 Years of Resistance), the members of a community under siege (Incident at Restigouche), or simply multiple narrative presences and voices (contemporary and archival) that speak to a collective experience of past tragedy and present activism (The Other Side of the Ledger, No Turning Back). All of the women-centred films, in contrast, adopt the “conventional” focus on singular political personalities: federal parliamentary candidates (Why Women Run, The Right Candidate for Rosedale); aspiring party leaders and beleaguered heads of government (Flora: Scenes from a Leadership Convention, Kim Campbell: Through the Looking Glass); a prominent Ottawa mayor (Love Affair with Politics: A Portrait of Marion Dewar) and a neophyte federal MP (Wendy Lill: A Playwright in Parliament). The only protagonist who is not a professional politician is a Governor-General (Michaelle Jean: A Woman of Purpose). What marks these documentaries as “alternative” is the informing assumption that the simple fact of their subjects’ gender ensures that their narratives will follow a different trajectory: a documentary centred on a woman in politics or governance is, necessarily, not just another story about politics or governance, however much the subject herself might wish it were.

Some institutional history is necessary here. In 1967 the NFB launched a “social activist documentary initiative” (Waugh et al. 2010, 4) known as Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle (CfC/SN). Over the next fourteen years, CfC/SN filmmakers produced more than 200 films and videos, applying direct cinema techniques to a range of contemporary social issues, often collaborating directly with affected communities, using film to both document and empower. In the estimate of a 2010 scholarly study, this state-financed initiative in media activism is “unique within Canadian – and indeed world, film history” (Waugh et al 2010, 6). Not all the First Nations or women-centred films we are considering were produced under the CfC/SN remit, but arguably all are the program’s aesthetic, political, and institutional heirs.

13 The appointed representative of the British Crown in Canada.
In the case of the most influential of the First Nations documentaries quite literally so.

In 1968, as part of the larger Challenge for Change initiative, the NFB created the “Indian Film Crew,” offering training and mentorship to seven young First Nations filmmakers. One of “the Crew’s” first productions was *You Are on Indian Land*, director Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell’s first-hand account of the confrontation between members of the Aknesaswe Reserve, then known as St. Regis, and provincial police near Cornwall, Ontario. *You Are on Indian Land* would prove influential among North American Indigenous communities and transformative for its director. According to the NFB website, the film was screened extensively, “helping to mobilize a new wave of Indigenous activism” across the continent and being shown, notably, during the 1970 occupation of Alcatraz by the protest group calling itself Indians of All Tribes.14

In an interview posted on the Toronto International Film Festival’s online journal The Review in 2017, Kanentakeron Mitchell recalled that his interviews with the protestors and his sharing of rough footage with them and other First Nations communities while the film was being made and edited led to an invitation to join the delegation being sent to Ottawa to negotiate an end to the crisis. The film literally politicized him and he would go on to serve as Grand Chief of Akwesasne for more than thirty years.15

*You Are on Indian Land* was followed in 1972 by *The Other Side of the Ledger* (co-directed by “Crew” member Willie Dunn and Martin Defalco) which used the 1970 public celebrations marking the three hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company to explore its legacy of violence, dispossession, and

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exploitation within Indigenous communities. In Linda Hutcheon’s (1991, 29) analysis, the most important political function of irony is the way it “neutralizes the impulse to believe in only one side of the story, any story.” The Other Side of the Ledger, like so many of the alternative narratives discussed in this section, insists on the other side of the story.

*Incident at Restigouche* (1984) and *Kahnesatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) were both directed by Alanis Obomsawin, another original member of the “Indian Film Crew.” Like *You Are on Indian Land*, both employ direct cinema techniques to document violent confrontations between Indigenous activists and local police forces. In these films, it is members of the Mi’gmaq and Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) nations and the Quebec Provincial Police (QPP). And like Kanentakeron Mitchell, Obomsawin “embedded” herself within the struggles she filmed. The climax of *Incident at Restigouche* is an angry verbal confrontation between the filmmaker, who is Abenaki, and the government minister responsible for the police action, culminating with Obomsawin denouncing the hypocrisy of a government that supports self-determination for Quebecois while suppressing the political, cultural, and economic rights of First Nations. In 1990 the town of Oka, Quebec approved the expansion of a golf course onto a traditional Mohawk burial ground, leading to armed Mohawk warriors occupying the site and a three-month standoff with the QPP and the Canadian Armed Forces. Obomsawin brought her film crew behind Mohawk lines for the duration of the Oka Crisis to provide the footage for her 1993 film.

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16 The “Indian Film Crew” would be reincarnated multiple times over several decades: as the “Indian Training Program” in 1972, “Studio One” in 1991, the “Aboriginal Training Program” in 1996, and “First Stories” in 2005. In June 2017, the NFB announced a three-year plan titled “Redefining the NFB’s Relationship to Indigenous Peoples.” As reported on the website of the CBC, the plan would see the Board end specific program streams for Indigenous productions, committing instead to earmarking 15 percent of total production spending for Indigenous content and increasing Indigenous staff from two to sixteen by 2025 (https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/nfb-new-relationship-indigenous-peoples-1.4167947, accessed July 12, 2021).
Gregory Coyes, the writer and director of *No Turning Back* (1996), who is of Metis/Cree and European descent, is in many ways the artistic and political heir of Kanentakeron Mitchell and Obomsawin. His film, too, “embeds,” spending two-and-half years following the activities of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, struck in the aftermath of the Oka Crisis, as it holds hearings in more than 100 communities across Canada. The contrast between the violent – and highly cinematic – confrontations in which the older filmmakers involve themselves and Coyes’s real-time tracking of the laborious diligence that would culminate in a 4000-page report with a twenty-year time frame for implementation could scarcely be stronger. (The film includes a pointed vignette of a young Indigenous researcher for the Commission wondering aloud “Is this just a 50 million dollar paper chase?”) Yet as both the narrator, well-known Cree actor Tina Keeper, and the film’s title make plain, the existence of the Commission is itself an acknowledgment that, after Oka, there will be – can be – no turning back.

Neither Maurice Bulbilian nor Tom Radford, the directors, respectively, of *Dancing Around the Table* (1987) and *The Honour of the Crown* (2001) are First Nations and they consequently stand somewhat outside of the institutional and artistic lineage we are tracing. Their films offer fascinating comparators to Coyes’s, however, since both deal with official interactions between First Nations leaders and federal and provincial first ministers, quintessential dramas of power and voice. Bulbilian’s account of the conferences between provincial and First Nations leaders required under the 1982 Constitution Act, intended to define the First Nations rights to be included by amendment, is a study in (ministerial) bad faith and cultural insensitivity. The unconcealed boredom and disrespect demonstrated, as well as the patent determination of some of the first ministers not to recognize principles of Indigenous self-determination, have only become more shocking with the passing of time. Bulbilian scarcely needed to include the sequences of clear-cut forests, depleted fish stocks, and traumatized communities to point the film’s indictment. Radford’s film is
the closest within this subset to a “conventional” narrative informed by the heroic structure of positive public and personal outcomes. And it is very much an outlier. Focalized entirely through the perspectives of Francois and Jerry Paulette, senior negotiator and Chief respectively of the Smith’s Landing First Nation in northern Alberta and narrated in the sonorous tones of well-loved CBC news anchor Bill Cameron, Honour of the Crown charts the brothers’ ultimately successful battle to reclaim land and compensation due under the obligations of an 1899 treaty.

Studio D, the “women’s film unit” within the NFB, was not conceived as part of the CfC/SN program, though it undoubtedly shared its animating, activist purpose. In the aftermath of the 1970 release of the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, and the federal government’s 1972 announcement of its commitment to the goals of International Women’s Year in 1975, Kathleen Shannon, who had made films for the CfC program, and a small group of other women employees began to pressure the Board to make an institutional commitment to fostering the production of films “of, by and for women.” The result was the founding, on a miniscule budget, of the world’s first state-funded women’s film unit (Sherbath 1987, 9) under the leadership of Shannon.

Despite an impressive output of over 120 films, including internationally lauded productions Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography (1981) and If You Love This Planet (1982), and three Academy Awards, Studio D was disbanded in 1996, a casualty of the severe cuts to the NFB budget imposed by the Chretien Government’s Program Review. Shannon had retired from her directorship of the unit in 1992. Writing in the journal Herizons in 1995, she was frank about the hostility Studio D encountered within the NFB itself, as well as outside of it, noting wryly “There are a lot of double binds in running a maverick, minority division within an institution that, in many ways, represents the status quo you are trying to change,” recalling too the

17 The phrase is taken from the in-house mandate of the unit, quoted in Vanstone (2007).
frequency with which she heard the sound of “the collective sigh of masculine patience sorely tried” when she raised issues of sexism and discriminatory practices within the institution (Shannon 1995, 26). As Table 2 indicates, the NFB continued to produce documentaries centering women’s experience even after the demise of Studio D. As was the case with its multiple iterations of targeted Indigenous production programs, the NFB has now abandoned the strategy of these sorts of institutional and production silos. In 2016, the Board announced a commitment to achieving full gender parity by 2020, with half of its productions directed by women and half of its production funding committed to those projects. A press release issued in March 2020 noted that the original goals had been met, with significant gains made on the additional goals of gender parity in editing and cinematography.  

Three of the women-centred documentaries in our subset were produced during the lifetime of Studio D (Flora: Scenes from a Leadership Convention; The Right Candidate for Rosedale; and Love Affair with Politics: A Portrait of Marion Dewar). But all of them arguably are structured by Studio D’s foundational premise: male is not the universal standard, women necessarily experience the world differently; representing that difference is therefore a fundamentally political act. And this is doubly true when the woman’s experience being represented is that of seeking a place within the official power structures of electoral politics and governance. Unlike the First Nations-centred documentaries which cluster almost entirely in the tragic quadrant of the structuring fable matrix, three of seven women-centred texts can be categorized as heroic (Love Affair with Politics, Wendy Lill, and Michèlle Jean), with another three sacrificial (Flora, The Right Candidate for Rosedale, and Why Women Run). Kim Campbell: Through the Looking Glass which documented the four-month tenure and catastrophic 1993 election campaign of Canada’s only female prime minister sits squarely in the tragic quadrant. While Dewar is depicted reflecting on a long, productive, and honoured career in civic politics, culminating in election to federal parliament, and Lill wins

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her seat in the federal parliament and successfully learns the parliamentary ropes, thereby instantiating positive outcomes, the heroic descriptor for these narratives conceals underlying similarities with the sacrificial and tragic texts. Both Dewar and Lill speak frankly of the difficulties they experience reconciling the competing demands of their public and private lives. Both are mothers and both are torn between their passionate desire to, as Lill puts it, “make a difference,” and the fear that they are “sacrificing” (Dewar’s word) their children to pursue that entirely laudable public goal. As A Playwright in Parliament makes plain, Lill’s burden of guilt is particularly heavy as her children are young and one is living with Down’s Syndrome.

Clearly, these heroic narratives about women politicians are shadowed in ways that are determined by persistent double standards and cultural expectations which women themselves continue to internalize. The remaining women-focused documentaries offer further explorations of the additional costs imposed on those who seek to practice politics while female. Given unrestricted access to long-time party activist and Member of Parliament Flora McDonald’s 1976 campaign for leadership of the federal Progressive Conservative Party, director Peter Raymont’s documentary makes clear that though McDonald ran an innovative and enthusiastic campaign, her gender proved an insuperable barrier. In the words of her campaign chair, “They [the delegates] walked into the booth with our buttons and voted for somebody else.” Seventeen years later, Kim Campbell, a senior minister in the Mulroney Government, would win her leadership campaign, only to see the national press, and the voting public, pay infinitely more attention to her personal life, appearance, wardrobe, and accessories than to her party’s platform or her own successful record as a minister. Male politicians lose elections all the time. But as Kathleen Shannon (1995, 27) noted in her reminiscence, for women who break ground, failure is never simply personal. It always carries with it the risk of being seen to have demonstrated on behalf of the entire gender that “women can’t do it, if she screwed up.”
Conclusion: Direct Cinema, the Sequel?

According to a recently published scholarly study, scripted serial drama is the single most valuable narrative commodity within the transnational media economy (Hilmes et al 2019, 1). It is also the most expensive genre to produce and “the weak link for the CBC, and for Canadian television generally” (Tinic 2009, 69). *Prairie Giant* cost $10 million to produce and *Trudeau: Maverick in the Making* $12 million in 2021 dollars. Wayne Grigsby estimates the current cost of docudrama to be much higher: $5 to $10 million per screen hour. The CBC has responded to these pressures by aggressively pursuing global co-production partnerships with other public service broadcasters around the world, notably both the BBC and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. As of 2009, the CBC was a world-leader in IJV, or International Joint Ventures. As hopeful as this sounds, there is a catch: “In order to increase a production’s international sales value, Canadian producers and their co-production partners often erase culturally specific markers and follow the grammar of Hollywood formulas and genres” (Tinic 2009, 69). Press coverage of the high-profile deals with the BBC and ABC struck in 2019 noted that previous coproduction ventures between them leaned heavily on nature documentaries and children’s programming. It seems most unlikely that docudrama/biopics of “famous in Canada” political figures like those we discuss will enjoy any sort of cultural premium in this new media environment. Or that if any are produced, they will avoid the kind of distortions and simplifications that doomed *Prairie Giant* or the genre cliches that shaped *October 1970*. This situation starkly illustrates the fundamental challenge *New Area Studies* is exploring, namely the constraints imposed by an increasingly transnational economy on national cultural producers.

At the same time, documentary as a screen genre, and a political practice, is experiencing an extraordinary reinvention, with digital affordances creating new formal possibilities as well as a proliferation of distribution modalities. An expanding network of on and offline documentary film festivals is attracting new demographics
of viewers whose daily screen habits effectively make them amateur documentarians themselves. At time of writing, Wikipedia lists eleven documentary film festivals in Canada. Of the 26 streaming services currently available nationally, Netflix, CBC Documentary Channel, CBC Gem, Amazon Prime, Sundance Now, HighballTV, Curiosity Stream, and Kanopy all have extensive and growing catalogues of documentaries. And the NFB, source of virtually all the documentaries discussed in this paper, has been quick to respond to this resurgence. NFB.ca/ONF.ca, a digital “screening room,” was launched in 2009, as well as the first in a family of mobile apps, making virtually all of the NFB’s current and archival productions readily available. According to the NFB’s 2019-2020 Departmental Results Report, posted on the Government of Canada website, online views of NFB productions worldwide exceeded 81 million, a ten percent increase from the previous year.19 In contrast, none of the CBC docudramas are available on the CBC’s streaming services. Some exist on DVD – an indication of the demographic niche to which they have been consigned by the broadcaster. Others have been posted on YouTube in violation of copyright and at the time of writing have not been taken down, which suggests a certain lack of concern on the part of the copyright holder. While viewcounts for political documentaries alone are not available, the online viewing figures reported by the NFB certainly suggest a growing appetite for distinctively Canadian documentary screen narratives.

It is not merely a case of if you make it, they will watch. We would argue further that the current technological and political moments – so inextricably bound together – are already producing twenty-first century versions of the NFB’s quintessentially politically relevant “direct cinema,” with cell phone videographers/activists replacing the original CfC/SN documentarians and their 16mm cameras or Sony Portapaks. The

NFB has been an innovator in interactive digital media production, including virtual reality, and has committed itself to innovation in the domain of remote collaboration for production, post-production, and distribution in the near term. Yet the intrinsic limitations of its status as a government agency means that it should not be the primary funding entity for politically relevant Canadian screen stories. For such stories to be politically salient, diverse, and culturally urgent, funding must be freed from the pressures of both government-of-the-day sensitivities and bureaucratic self-censorship. The Trudeau Government’s Bill C-10 (An Act to Amend the Broadcasting Act) requiring digital streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime to contribute to the Canada Media Fund and to promote Canadian content on their services was approved by the House of Commons but was not considered by the Senate prior to the election of September 20, 2021. If it or similar legislation is enacted by the new government, it would provide an opportunity to create flexible, truly arms-length funding structures to support emerging generations of political storytellers, as well as the prospect of far-reaching distribution channels for their work. It may seem counterintuitive to look back to a fifty-year-old NFB initiative for a possible future for politically relevant Canadian screen narrative, but the bureaucrats and producers who cooperated to conceive and launch the Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle program understood that cultural and political representation cannot be separated and that the most pressing questions for any democracy will always be: Who is seen? Who is heard? Whose stories matter?
Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at the 2021 Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration research conference. The authors appreciate the comments of Gary Evans, Thomas Smith, Elise Swerhone, and Larry Weinstein and the research assistance of Joshua White and Jayani Patel. Funding was provided by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant 435-2016-0146. The authors are happy to be contacted: sandford.borins@utoronto.ca, btherst@gmail.com.
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