

**A New Reality is Better Than a New Movie!**  
**Committed Documentary and Class Struggle at the**  
**End of the American New Left**

by  
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B.A. (Sociology), Simon Fraser University, 2014

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

in the  
School of Communication  
Faculty of Communication, Art, and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Spring 2019

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the political conjuncture surrounding the U.S. New Communist Movement's break with the New Left of the 1960s, tracing the coordinates of this ideological shift through the lens of committed documentary. I argue that a materialist analysis of committed documentary necessitates understanding the form according to an aesthetics of political use-value. By attending to the question of documentary's political utility, I demonstrate how films were used as cultural tools for conducting hegemonic struggles over certain political issues. Focusing on the contested dialectical relation between class and race, I trace period debates over the political status of the black proletariat through readings of four documentaries: *Columbia Revolt* (1968), *Black Panther* (1968), *Finally Got the News* (1970), and *Wildcat at Mead* (1972). Through these analyses, I argue for the centrality of political organization to any useful theory and practice of cultural commitment as a form of revolutionary politics.

**Keywords:** committed documentary; League of Revolutionary Black Workers; New Communist Movement; New Left; Newsreel; October League

*For Meaghan,  
of course*

## Acknowledgements

Not a single word of this thesis would have been possible without the steadfast love, support, and friendship of my wife Meaghan Iversen. She has patiently and graciously encouraged me through the many, many iterations of this project as I have slowly stumbled my way toward the version you have before you.

Thank you to my senior supervisor Dr. Zoë Druick, who has been a great source of insight and encouragement the past few years, even when I imagine I was a trying advisee. In those infrequent moments when we have parted ways intellectually, I do believe that her critiques have only served to sharpen and hone my own positions. This thesis is undoubtedly better for her contribution. For all of this, I owe a great debt of thanks. I am deeply grateful as well to my examiner Dr. Christopher Pavsek, who has posed for me a rigorous and exciting vision of Marxist film scholarship since I first saw Eisenstein, Sirk, Fassbinder, and Tahimik in his introductory film history class nearly a decade ago. And thank you also to my external examiner Dr. Jonathan Kahana, not only for his thoughtful engagement with my project, but for the invaluable insights his own work has offered in the course of my research.

Of course, I would be remiss if I failed to properly thank Sylvia Roberts and Donald Taylor from the SFU Library for their help in tracking down what are some very obscure films. Thank you to Jennifer Zerkee from the SFU Copyright Office for making copyright law make sense, and thank you to Kierra Enns from the SFU Research Commons for the equally impressive feat of making the byzantine formatting of the Library's thesis template make sense. Thank you also to Roselly Torres, Eugene Lee, and Danny Kim from Third World Newsreel and Livia Bloom Ingram from Icarus Films for their kind permissions and help in reproducing images from films I truly believe to be among the most important of their era. *Columbia Revolt*, from which I include still images in Chapter 2, was preserved by Third World Newsreel in 2013 with the assistance of the National Film Preservation Foundation.

Thank you to my friends, colleagues, and comrades in the Teaching Support Staff Union, School of Communication, Young Communist League, and Communist Party of Canada for providing me with the spaces and relationships to work through the political and cultural ideas that have found their way into these pages. I beg your

forgiveness for all of the hours spent reading and writing rather than organizing with you. Thank you to my first and oldest friend, my brother Levi Williams, who has contributed, both directly and indirectly, so much to the way I think about the world and our responsibilities to it. And finally, I cannot adequately express my thanks to my parents, Marilyn and Randy Williams, who have always supported and encouraged my intellectual pursuits, even when it meant me devoting some two and a half years to thinking about communist documentaries and decades-old political debates and polemics.

The majority of the research and writing that became *A New Reality is Better Than a New Movie!* was carried out on the unceded and occupied territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), xwməθkwəy'əm (Musqueam), Sə́lilwətał (Tseil-Waututh), kwikwə́ləm (Kwikwetlem), Katzie, and Stó:lō.

To all of the comrades who have come before us, who have indirectly made this project possible through their commitment to universal liberation, I hope that the chapters to follow will serve as both fitting tribute and comradely critique. As ever,

*¡Hasta la victoria siempre!*

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## List of Acronyms

AFL	American Federation of Labor
BPP	Black Panther Party
BWC	Black Workers Congress
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
COINTELPRO	Counter Intelligence Program
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
DRUM	Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
ELRUM	Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Movement
FRUM	Ford Revolutionary Union Movement
GCL	Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist)
NCM	New Communist Movement
OCAW	Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union
OL	October League (Marxist-Leninist)
PCI	Italian Communist Party
PL	Progressive Labor [Party]
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party, USA
RU	Revolutionary Union
RUM	Revolutionary Union Movement
RWH	Revolutionary Workers' Headquarters
RYM	Revolutionary Youth Movement
RYM I	Revolutionary Youth Movement I [a.k.a. Weatherman]
RYM II	Revolutionary Youth Movement II
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Fund
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNCC	Student Nonviolent [National] Coordinating Committee
SSOC	Southern Student Organizing Committee
UAW	United Automobile Workers
WFPL	Workers Film and Photo League
WUO	Weather Underground Organization

*Crude thoughts have a special place in dialectical thinking because their sole function is to direct theory toward practice. They are directives toward practice, not for it; action can, of course, be as subtle as thought. But a thought must be crude to find its way into action.*

— *Walter Benjamin, “Brecht’s Threepenny Novel” (1935)*

*Party work in literature and art occupies a definite and assigned position in Party revolutionary work as a whole and is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party in a given revolutionary period.*

— *Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yen’an Forum on Literature and Art” (1942)*

*[...] the ahistoric avant-garde aloofness by which bourgeois culture sidetracks the political artist [...]*

— *Thomas Waugh, “Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries” (1984)*

## Chapter 1.

### Introduction: Commitment and the Aesthetics of Political Use-Value

*Pictures of a propaganda and educative nature should be checked by old Marxists and writers, to avoid a repetition of the many sad instances when propaganda with us defeated its own purpose.*

— V. I. Lenin, “Directives on the Film Business” (1925)

*Because the political situation is always changing, no single universal political criterion can apply to radical documentary. However, any fully revolutionary analysis within such work must answer two questions. First, what is the situation? Second, how can it change? In other words, the documentary must deal with structure and contradiction.*

— Chuck Kleinhans, “Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary” (1984)

In early 1969, the membership of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW) Local 1-561 walked off the job in Richmond, California, an industrial working class city of a little less than 80 thousand people, just north of Berkeley on the east side of San Francisco Bay. Part of a nationwide oil workers’ strike, what was unique about the fight in Richmond was the enfolding of this labour action with the student struggles going on around the Bay Area at the same time. The OCAW workers, most but not all of them white, were unexpectedly joined on the line by militant students hailing from multiple Bay Area colleges and universities. Even though this period saw the U.S. student movement grow into an enormously powerful political force—arguably the greatest it has ever been, before or since—the student solidarity action in Richmond represented one of the only such alliances between industrial workers and revolutionary students during the mid to late ‘60s. It is fortunate, then, that the uncommon worker-student alliance in Richmond is

the subject of San Francisco Newsreel's short documentary *Richmond Oil Strike* (1969).<sup>1</sup> The film's lean 16-minute running time is common for Newsreel productions of the time: it is sufficient to present a political scene, identify the social forces involved, highlight the central antagonism underlying the action, and hypothesize by what political route this contradiction can be overcome, even if such a resolution is yet unrealized and thus for the moment remains beyond realist representation. In general appearance, the rough, off-the-cuff shooting style is not far off from straightforward direct cinema, save for some narration and a handful of formal interjections—most notably the ironic appropriation of stock promotional footage from a Standard Oil-produced industrial film. The images of the strike itself are immediate, their indexicality not scrutinized (even if the principled, liberal non-interventionism of direct cinema's heyday is clearly absent).

But what is most significant about *Richmond Oil Strike*, aside from its distinction as the first labour-themed documentary ever produced by a chapter of the Newsreel network of documentary collectives, is the turn it evinces towards a sense of collaborative or collective vocal address that shifts between the traditionally authoritative filmmaker as narrator and the voices of the social actors—that is, the strikers and their families—with their “*situated* presence and *local* knowledge” (Nichols, 1991, p. 44; emphasis in original). The men and women on the picket line are able to describe not only the police abuses they have endured while the camera was not around and the growing worker-student solidarities that have blossomed in response, but articulate their own developing interpretations of the strike and the relationship between the state and capital. The activists, organizers, and semi-professional revolutionaries of Newsreel and the student groups on the ground like the Revolutionary Union (RU) can identify and denounce Shell or Standard Oil as imperialist entities, but only a striking worker can address the camera and admit, “I’ve seen over television and read in the newspapers about this police brutality, and I always thought it was—and tried to tell my children and my wife that it’s a bunch of radical troublemakers out looking for publicity, looking for

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is not explicitly referred to in the film, the oil workers' strike, which ran from January until March 1969, overlapped with the Third World Liberation Front student strikes at San Francisco State College and UC Berkeley, which began in November 1968 and January 1969, respectively, and both ended in March 1969. Another San Francisco Newsreel film, *San Francisco State: On Strike* (1969), deals with the student strikes, but likewise does not mention the Richmond connection.

trouble. Now I have changed my mind.”<sup>2</sup> Because *Richmond Oil Strike* is such a short work, with little time to dedicate to narrative development, vocal recollection as a personalized mode of narrative inscription is granted a great deal of importance by the filmmakers. The indexical minutiae of the strike—that which the observational camera would record as the “really real”—is mostly telescoped into short bursts of testimonial information and vernacular analysis. The film’s representation of growing class consciousness as a collective experiential process, communicated most lucidly through these moments of testimony, indicates a particular focus on the epistemological dimension of documentary, over and above the artistic and dramatic dimensions.

## 1.1. Documentary Culture of the Late New Left

As Jane M. Gaines notes in her influential essay on “Political Mimesis” (1999) in documentary, the tone of her prose caught somewhere between drollness and the sobriety of lengthy contemplation, political documentaries contesting the dominant ideological climate have rarely had a direct, concrete effect on the sociopolitical constitution of the societies in which they were produced and exhibited (pp. 85-86). Of course, this problem is exacerbated by empirical and categorical issues relating to just how one might register or measure impact: “What do we count as change? How do we know what effects the film has produced? How do we determine where consciousness leaves off and action begins?” (p. 88). These sorts of practical questions, regrettably, have far too often been bracketed out of the political consideration of documentary—and cinema in general—in favour of more culturally and academically palatable, deep sea aesthetic expeditions into the inky black abyss of semiotic analysis. And while research of this sort has yielded a great wealth of progress in our understanding of the social and aesthetic characters of film as a medium, these advances have frequently come at the expense of an honest collective appraisal of the way that documentaries function as

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<sup>2</sup> RU leader Bob Avakian estimated that his group was able to mobilize between 300 and 400 students in support of the strike against Standard Oil, a showing that “seriously bolstered the effort, nearly shutting the giant refinery down” in spite of “tepid union support and Standard Oil’s strikebreaking effort of importing scab, non-union labor” (Leonard and Gallagher, 2014, pp. 64, 63).

unique elements within the cultural and political fields of the Left as it exists outside the often insular publics of film culture.

During the 1960s, many young filmmakers variously associated with the New Left and the existing underground cinema movement in the United States began producing documentaries, often short subjects like the newsreels of the interwar years, depicting and promoting the different political and social struggles and countercultural milieus then stirring U.S. society. Aesthetically, many of these films had their roots in the rough formal methods of direct cinema, often referred to as *cinéma vérité*, an observational mode of realism that first entered the popular lexicon of American documentary through Robert Drew's influential Kennedy campaign trail doc *Primary* (1960). Over the course of the decade, this direct cinematic observationalism would become the hegemonic mode of documentary representation in U.S. culture (Nichols, 1991, pp. 39-44). Direct cinema was defined in large part by the allegedly unobtrusive presence of the camera, made possible by the availability of lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronous recording technology, and a reified, quasi-empiricist focus on the minutiae of individual actors in their "unguarded moments of speech or gesture" as a sort of hermeneutical key for establishing generalizable "social truth" (Kahana, 2008, p. 153). So while the emerging documentarians of the New Left, many of them amateurs, rarely had the resources or, in many cases, the formal and technical competencies to develop the intimate portraits for which direct cinema was notable, pragmatic concerns about the low cost and expediency afforded by the style frequently won out. These new political documentarians, however, were often interested in more than simple observation. While still caught in the gravitational pull of the observational cinema's aesthetic ideology, a cultural liberalism often misinterpreted as humble journalistic disinterest, the new documentary began to display a *partisan* interest in the reproduction and *purposeful use* of what the camera can observe.

Just as important as the aesthetic development of this movement was the way it developed organizationally. Numerous production companies and filmmaking collectives were founded in major cities and colleges towns around the U.S. in the span of a few short years. Some of these groups were independent, while other larger organizations were composed of local chapters operating with varying degrees of autonomy from one another. Examples of these smaller independent groups were the New York-based anarchist Pacific Street Collective (founded 1969), feminist co-operative distributor New

Day Films (founded 1971), and Chicago's Film Group and Kartemquin Films (founded 1965 and 1966, respectively).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the largest and most influential group to emerge from this trend was Newsreel, which began as a production collective in New York in late 1967 but quickly expanded, both in the size and scope of its activities, to boast chapters across the country, with New York and San Francisco as its dominant coastal poles. At its height, Newsreel not only produced and distributed its own projects, but also distributed documentaries by other radical American producers and imported Third World films from Africa, Asia, and Latin America for distribution in the United States.<sup>4</sup> As part of a broader investigation of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the New Left milieu in 1969, they were the subjects of considerable surveillance and scrutiny by the Congressional House Committee on Internal Security. Newsreel, to a greater extent than any of their contemporaries, was able to exploit its substantial

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<sup>3</sup> Others, like the San Francisco-based, "Marxist-Reichian" collective Cine Manifest (founded 1972) and Newsreel co-founder Robert Kramer, eventually sought to move beyond the documentary form's perceived limitations by applying documentary techniques to radical dramatic films like the historical *Northern Lights* (John Hanson & Rob Nilsson, 1978) about farmer organizing in North Dakota during the 1910s, and *Ice* (Kramer, 1970), a near-future vision of urban revolution in a fascist Nixonite America. For more on Cine Manifest, see Corr and Gessner (1970). On Kramer, see Brom (1976).

<sup>4</sup> One of those countries that Newsreel imported films from was, of course, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Just as the U.S. military's genocidal misadventures in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos represented perhaps the the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most devastating experience of imperialist violence, the heroic struggle for national liberation fought to rid southeast Asia of Yankee aggression proved to be the era's greatest inspiration and catalyst towards mass revolutionary politics at home in the belly of the beast. It is not an exaggeration to say that the student, working class, and anti-racist movements that I address in this thesis simply could not have existed in any form resembling what they would eventually become without the foundational experiences of the draft, the anti-war movement, and the war itself. The irony of the American reaction to the Vietnam War, as sociologist Göran Therborn enthused at the height of the movement, was that it was only through bearing witness to this deeply asymmetrical struggle in the global periphery that socialism could become "no longer an alien social model, but an immediate ideological inspiration—a source of emulation. The Vietnamese Revolution [...] has shattered the cemented unity of American society and at last *reactivated* its internal contradictions" (1968, p. 6; emphasis in original). Consequently, the Vietnam War was a subject of intense interest for committed documentarians both in the United States and abroad. Numerous committed anti-war documentaries representing positions across the political spectrum, from liberal to revolutionary communist, were produced during and following the war. To properly attend to this subgenre of committed documentaries would require a research project of far greater scope than I have here undertaken. Ironically, my study of "Committed Documentary and Class Struggle at the End of the American New Left" cannot hope to contain the largest, most diverse body of committed documentaries, concerning one of the most dynamic instances of class struggle ever fought in the United States and its imperialist sphere of influence. For more on the subject of Vietnam in '60s and '70s American documentary, see, e.g., Blaylock (2017), Grosser (1990), James (1989, pp. 195-213), Kahana (2008, pp. 180-196), Landau (1975) and Renov (1990). For an annotated political chronology of U.S. documentary productions concerning the Vietnam War, see Dittmar and Michaud (1990).



organizational connections with groups like SDS to document many of the defining events and struggles of the New Left's fever pitch during 1968 and 1969, before the institutional scaffolding uniting much of the student and anti-war movements—not to mention Newsreel's distribution network—collapsed under the weight of growing ideological differences and strategic aporias.

As these film collectives did not for the most part emphasize traditional organizing in their own political work, most strove to cultivate relationships with other organizers in order to gain access to the mass movements they sought to involve themselves with. Beyond a desire to produce work merely depicting or critically reflecting on political and social conditions, these documentarians wanted to develop a cultural practice that could concretely “act” through the production, distribution, and exhibition of their films, “intervene—whether as gut level calls to immediate, localized action, or as more cerebral essay in long-term, global analysis” (Waugh, 1984, p. xiii). This sense of documentary filmmaking as a cultural practice that should break with and move beyond the mere observation or interpretation of the world—no matter how critical or reflexive—is what some film scholars seek to make sense of through the concept of “committed documentary.” Committed documentary filmmaking has a long history, almost as old as the concept of documentary itself, which joins the hegemonically liberal cultural tradition of the Anglo-American social documentary with the radical political problematic of “commitment.” Commitment in relation to art or culture as a general concept is not unique to Marxism—as indeed Thomas Waugh notes in his *mea culpa* for the relative over-representation of the Marxist tradition in the edited collection, “*Show Us Life*”: *Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, which has since become the standard text for this body of documentary research (1984, pp. xxv-xxvi)—but its emergence as a central question of intellectual and artistic solidarity and engagement during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century must be understood in light of the political questions posed by the world-historical shifts in the working class movement during that period. The century's second such revolutionary shift in the global balance of class forces, once again posing the challenge of commitment at a pan-cultural level, took place during the period sometimes referred to as the long 1960s, a sequence of social and political struggle that reached its climax in the U.S. context with the late New Left.

In this study, I will explore the growth of a minor tendency in the history of committed documentary filmmaking, which developed as a revolutionary form of political

and cultural practice in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a component of the communist turn in the late- and post-New Left movement. Although many ideological trends and organizational forms developed in response to the experience of the New Left's limitations and failures, perhaps the most striking—and certainly the most forgotten—was the reclamation of Marxism-Leninism by the left wings of the student and anti-racist movements, which sparked a flurry of organizing under the self-styled banner of the “New Communist Movement.” Instead of the campus, the paradigmatic site of struggle was now the factory. Likewise, the diffuse student, anti-racist, and anti-war concerns of the old New Left found themselves sharpened and solidified in the new focus on proletarian class struggle, anti-imperialism, and Third World liberation as the fundamental axes of U.S. and global revolution. Until then a mostly forgotten relic of the interwar Old Left, over the course of the '60s Marxism-Leninism slowly regained ideological ground among U.S. revolutionaries through its association with Cuba, Vietnam, elements of the anti-colonial movement in Africa, and especially China. The Communist Party of China's ties to Third World liberation struggles, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the provocative, “anti-revisionist” defense of Marxism-Leninism's core principles promised a radical break with the Soviet-aligned old guard's alleged class collaborationism and bureaucracy—a new way to pursue communism. In response to this new direction, many committed documentarians sought to bind their projects to the highly militant, centralized outfits and strategies of the new anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninists. For various reasons, this convergence of documentary practice and communist organizing was short lived, but the small body of work produced during this moment stands as a unique example in the history of U.S. documentary of the effects of revolutionary organization and ideological discipline on the shaping and political uses of committed documentary film.

To date, the body of scholarship of any sort on the New Communist Movement and the development of anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism on the American Left has been exceptionally small, especially in comparison with the veritable cottage industry of work that has been produced about the New Left.<sup>5</sup> Even less research has been

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<sup>5</sup> Although a substantive consideration of the extant literature on the New Communist Movement and its associated social and political publics and milieus is beyond the scope of this study, I can recommend the following secondary sources, many of which I cite and expand on over the course of this thesis, as well as the Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line, a substantial online archive of mostly primary sources compiled and edited by former NCM cadre and theorist Paul Saba. To

undertaken by scholars of documentary, media theory, political history, or social movement studies to map and theorize the relationship(s) between the Marxist-Leninist current that bridged the New Left and New Communist Movement periods and the cultural institutions of documentary production, distribution, and exhibition that accompanied and contributed to this trend. So while this thesis does not constitute a comprehensive history of its topic, it is my hope that it can serve as the first step towards the work of closing that gap.

## 1.2. Commitment and Art

What does it mean to participate in political action? How does a person develop political consciousness? How should the oppressed and exploited organize and express themselves politically? In other words: what is to be done? These are the fundamental political questions posed by the recognition of the social fact of class struggle, which, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously argued, is the beating heart of the “history of all hitherto existing society” (1978, p. 473). But how much more complex must the answers become when it is not the oppressed and exploited, those who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” asking these questions, but rather the educated middle classes (p. 500)? The foundations of the debate over commitment in cultural work are most often traced back to the early investigations in European Marxism on the twin problematics of the status of art under advanced capitalism and the relationship of the intellectual petit bourgeoisie to the proletarian class struggle, but this in itself can only be a stepping stone to understanding the scope of the issue.

On these particular topics, the now-canonized (and endlessly anthologized)

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date, the vast majority of the historical and theoretical work on the NCM has been undertaken by scholars who were themselves involved with the movement. For the only synthetic and comprehensive history of the NCM yet undertaken, see Elbaum (2006). See also Alexander (2001), Duncan (Ed.) (2017), Fields (1988), Geschwender (1978), Leonard and Gallagher (2018), O'Brien (1977/1978), Staudenmaier (2012), and Taylor (2007) for survey histories of select organizations and tendencies. For localized histories of specific organizations and struggles, see Georgakas and Surkin (1998), Geschwender (1977), Hamilton (1979) and (1980), Leonard and Gallagher (2014), Michel (2009), Shapiro (2016), and Waugh-Benton (2006). On the relationship between the NCM, the People's Republic of China, and the black freedom struggle in the U.S., see Baraka (1984), Frazier (2015), Kelley (2002), Young (2006), and Ho and Mullen (Eds.) (2008), especially Kelley and Esch (2008). Finally, for considerations of the NCM's contemporary value for the Left, see Elbaum (2018), Haider and Saba (2015), Saba (2017) and (2018), and Shapiro (2018).

figures of this debate—Theodor W. Adorno (1988), Walter Benjamin (1989), Bertolt Brecht (1988), and Jean-Paul Sartre (1949), chief among them—were primarily concerned with literary forms like the novel, drama, essay, and poetry. Additionally, the political stakes of commitment in their work specifically begins with “art” as a category, rather than “culture” or “communication,” more encompassing spheres of social thought and practice, to which the documentary might be more easily assimilated.<sup>6</sup> As a dramatist and poet, Brecht is perhaps the single figure most associated with modern committed art. For him, commitment hinges on applying to art the twin concepts of the popular and realism, by which he means producing art that is “intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it,” all the while “discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power” (1988, pp. 81-82). Benjamin’s most significant statement on commitment, appropriately, is his 1934 essay, on his friend and interlocutor Brecht, “The Artist as Producer.” He argues that the revolutionary artist is political not only in attitude, in the content or style of their work, but in their relation to the production process; as (in most cases) a member of the petit bourgeoisie, the artist must develop solidarity with the proletariat through a “functional transformation” of the productive apparatus (1989, p. 228). By contrast, in *What is Literature?* (1949), Sartre emphasizes the text and its form, or rather the reader’s encounter with text, as the primary site of cultural commitment. Sartre castigates poetry as a paradigmatically aloof art form, in contrast with prose writing, which he designates as “in essence, utilitarian.” “I would readily define the prose-writer as a man [*sic*],” he continues, “who *makes use* of words” (p. 19; emphasis in original). Thus prose, and presumably any other form that can be said to signify or designate meaning with clarity, is for Sartre the privileged form for committed cultural production. While this does not entail a rejection of artistic or aesthetic achievement, it places this dimension squarely within the purview of the writer’s ultimate political responsibility. Adorno (1988), finally, is the odd figure out of this group for his vociferous defense of autonomous art against what he identifies as the misplaced self-assurances of the

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, to say that literary forms framed the basis for the debate of committed art is not to suggest that they were the sole objects of inquiry for these thinkers. The Germans Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht were particularly concerned with mass media forms like cinema and radio. While Adorno expurgated them as reified vehicles of the culture industry, Benjamin and Brecht exhibited a cautiously optimistic curiosity about the conditions under which mass media could be appropriated as popular or radical forms.

committed position. It is not the political desire to contribute through the creation of art to the creation of a better world to which he is opposed, only the assumption that capital's reification of the social has left space enough for the coincidence of culture and practical politics. His infamous rejoinder to this is the modernist abstraction of autonomous art, which, in its aesthetic negation of the world that is, holds fast to the utopian—what he calls the “hidden ‘it should be otherwise’” (p. 194).

But this central body of texts is hardly comprehensive of the commitment problematic within the broader Marxist tradition. Pro and contra, the received literature about commitment, which is for the most part framed by an aesthetic vocabulary inherited from the bourgeois cultures of European modernity, becomes greatly relativized in the face of a body of work like committed documentary, a largely anonymous genre in which trained filmmakers are more frequently the exception than they are the norm. Regardless of their politics, none of the above theorists were ever members of a communist or socialist party, or otherwise subject to the formal disciplinary requirements of a militant political organization.<sup>7</sup> “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives,” declared Adorno, “but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads” (1988, p. 180). One would not be blamed for wondering whether the object of Adorno's attack is even the same thing as what Thomas Waugh seeks to understand when the latter asks,

How do we talk about films whose aesthetics consist in political use-value? What does the concept of an aesthetics of political use-value mean, beyond the fact, say, that *The Spanish Earth* raised enough funds to send eighteen ambulances to the Spanish front? (1984, p. xxii)

Clearly, it is necessary to expand the scope of thought on cultural commitment in order to account for the distance between the fields of cultural production and reception exemplified by the autonomous art valorized by Adorno (or even the epic theatre of Brecht, opposed to autonomous art though it may be) on one side and Joris Ivens's

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<sup>7</sup> Brecht comes the closest on this score. Although he was never a member of the prewar Communist Party of Germany or the postwar Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), he lived and worked in the German Democratic Republic from 1945 until 1956 with the support of the SED. Sartre, likewise, was an active supporter of the Communist Party of France during the early 1950s, before drifting away from the Party during the Khrushchev years.

absolutely committed Popular Front propaganda documentary on the other.<sup>8</sup> In other words, we must return to Marx.

### 1.3. Commitment and Party

Waugh (1984, p. xiv), in defining commitment for the purposes of his own work on documentary, turns to Marx's eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach to find a historical grounding for the concept: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (1978d, p. 145; emphasis in original). Here, driven by the social forces of the unfolding bourgeois cultural revolution, Marx poses a political imperative by way of identifying a revolutionary historical shift in the possible relationship of intellectual and cultural work to social life more generally. Because of how widely cited it is, however, this passage is oftentimes treated as a simple maxim, divorced from the framework of Marx's larger critique of Feuerbach, which is at heart a reflection on materialism. In the eighth thesis, Marx writes, "Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice" (p. 145; emphasis in original). The contradictions of intellectual and cultural inquiry, put simply, can only be resolved in the dialectical movement of thought into practice, a movement that in turn poses new problems for thought. If there exists a fundamental methodological core to Marxism, it is in the recognition and application of this dialectic.

Although Marx does not himself use the term to designate this problem for the philosopher (which we might replace with the intellectual or cultural worker as more encompassing subjects), this is surely "commitment" concentrated to its most basic proposition. This principle, however, does not provide a prescriptive or programmatic

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the remove between their respective projects, the outwardly mandarin philosopher and social critic Adorno (1903-1969) and the globetrotting Communist documentarian Ivens (1898-1989) were both western European Marxists, and were contemporaries of the same generation. As such, their respective social fields occasionally overlapped in revealing ways. For instance, both men collaborated at various points with the committed composer Hanns Eisler, himself best known for his collaborations with Brecht. Adorno co-wrote *Composing for the Films* (1947) with Eisler, while Eisler contributed scores to numerous films directed by Ivens, including *Regen* (1929), *Komsomol* (1932), *New Earth* (1933), and *The 400 Million* (1939). See Bick (2008).

route for the committed intellectual.<sup>9</sup> That gap would be filled by V. I. Lenin, in his theorization and leadership of the vanguard Bolshevik Party. The pre-eminent left political form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Leninist vanguard party is a revolutionary communist organization, adhering to democratic centralist principles, composed of disciplined cadres drawn from the most politically advanced ranks of the working class and progressive petit bourgeoisie. The leadership that the party is capable of exercising, both internally and through its involvement with progressive mass movements, provides the committed intellectual with a framework through which to produce cultural and theoretical work of concrete use to the struggle. Lenin (1987) places special importance on the vanguard's development of revolutionary theory and organizational practice, which only the party can incubate:

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only outside of the economic struggle, outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships between *all* the various classes and strata and the state and the government—the sphere of the interrelations between *all* the various classes. [...] To bring political knowledge to the *workers* the Social-Democrats must *go among all classes of the population*, must dispatch units of their army *in all directions*. (pp. 112-113; emphasis in original)

With the structural innovations of the “party of a new type”—certainly not the earliest organizational model for class struggle, but a qualitative advance in its capacity to facilitate political work of all kinds—the contributions of committed intellectuals or cultural workers, “as theoreticians, as propagandists, as agitators and as organizers,” could be more systematically integrated into the general political strategy of the party and, for lack of a better word, become more *effective* (p. 115).

With the founding of the Third International in 1919 and the adoption of Lenin's “Twenty-one Conditions” for Comintern membership in 1920, communist parties around the world were established or reformed along democratic centralist and vanguard lines. Many attempted to build on and adapt the Bolshevik model of cultural politics in

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<sup>9</sup> Most of Marx and Engels's detailed reflections on the forms and strategies the communist movement should take up were not written until the final decade of Marx's life, after the brief revolutionary experience of the Paris Commune in 1871, which they saw as the first historical example of the dictatorship of the proletariat. That is to say, like Marx's theorization of commitment, a theory of the forms of revolutionary struggle only became realizable as the historical conditions of possibility for working class struggle made it so.

recognition of the ways in which the party-form, for better and for worse, faces determinative, mediating factors in its relationships with “the various classes and strata” of the masses who could be won over to the struggle for socialism. The most lasting and influential of these innovations are found in the works of Antonio Gramsci and Mao Zedong. Both thinkers elevate the superstructural dimension of ideological struggle to a foundational position in their conceptions of communist struggle; indeed, there is a surprising amount of overlap between their respective theories of intellectuals and cultural revolution.<sup>10</sup>

Gramsci (1971), for instance, argues that each and every person “carries on intellectual activity [...] and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it” (p. 9). Intellectuals act at all levels of society, and, on the basis of their recognized social or intellectual authority within a given sphere or milieu, play an important role in mediating the ideological formation of the masses. The process of building proletarian hegemony requires, firstly, the cultivation of “organic intellectuals” from the proletariat and peasantry who can combat bourgeois ideology and concretely analyze and articulate workers’ class interests; and secondly, winning over and assimilating “traditional intellectuals” from the petit bourgeoisie or other institutional formations with recognized public authority. While organic intellectuals must be present in the party among the general membership (“mass element”) and the leadership (“cohesive element”), Gramsci argues that the developed organic intellectual or party cadre most often plays an “intermediate” role, “which articulates the first [mass] element with the second [cohesive] and maintains contact between them, not only physically but also morally and intellectually” (1971, pp. 152-153).

For Gramsci, intellectual and practical commitment are more often than not simply two sides of the same coin. The same can be said of Mao (1967), except that in his case, the explicit theorization of cultural production—and thus communist cultural policy—as within the party’s purview of revolutionary leadership is taken even further. Obliquely recalling the Brechtian dyad of realism and the popular, Mao proposes in the Chinese context a cultural dialectic of “raising standards” and “popularization,” or the contextual movement between the social, cultural, and aesthetic education of the mostly

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<sup>10</sup> For more sustained reflections on the consonance and compatibility of Gramsci’s and Mao’s respective understandings of ideology, hegemony, and culture, see Dirlik (1983) and Liu (2000, pp. 72-110).



illiterate peasant masses on one side, and on the other cultural production corresponding to popular or vernacular forms rather than those most palatable to the bourgeois intelligentsia (1967, pp. 16-17). This idea is a more focused articulation of the general Maoist principle of the mass line. Encapsulated in the slogan, “from the masses, to the masses,” the mass line holds that the party’s political program and practice be crafted through a process of active inquiry into the concrete concerns of the workers, the theoretical systematization and re-articulation of the workers’ ideas back to them, and finally the development of concrete strategies for moving forward to resolve the problems (Mao, 1971, pp. 290-291). More so than any other, this model bridges the experimental contributions of the Western Marxists with the practical considerations of the more orthodox Leninist school. Raymond Williams identifies in Mao’s contribution an entirely unique conception of committed cultural work, a qualitative advance in its theory and practice, which he summarizes thusly:

But what is theoretically most interesting in Mao’s argument, alongside previously familiar positions, is an emphasis on the transformation of social relations between writers and the people. [...] ‘Commitment’ is a move by a hitherto separated, socially and politically distanced, or alienated writing. Mao’s alternative theoretical and practical emphasis is on *integration*: not only the integration of writers into popular life, but a move beyond the idea of the specialist writer to new kinds of popular, including collaborative, writing. (1977, p. 203; emphasis in original)

This sense of integration, much like Gramsci’s concept of the organic intellectual, points beyond the political desires of the committed petit bourgeoisie towards a collective program and strategy of cultural and ideological struggle, up to and including the revolutionary transformation of culture itself.

## **1.4. Commitment and Documentary**

Although a recognizable theory and practice of documentary cinema already existed by the time of documentary pioneer John Grierson’s major writings of the early 1930s, it is his almost throwaway definition of the documentary that has endured as the form’s

mythological cornerstone: “the creative treatment of actuality” (2016, p. 216).<sup>11</sup> Brian Winston (1995), himself highly critical of Grierson’s theory and practice of liberal reformist documentary and their effect on subsequent theory, nevertheless looks to this definition to distill what he argues are the three major problematics or competing tendencies documentary has had to deal with as a result of this inheritance: documentary as art (“creative”), drama (“treatment”), and science (“actuality”). These components frequently clash or contradict one another, but their practical incongruities, and the relative constellations of meaning that filmmakers must map out among them, also provide the practical terms of documentary’s shifting ideological coordinates, the field upon which competing cinematic and extra-cinematic discourses are negotiated.

The boundaries demarcating documentary studies as a discipline are such that little research to date has been conversant with both the academic and practical bodies of political thought on the problem of commitment. And although much has been written in fragments, few scholars have attempted to develop exhaustive histories or theories of the committed documentary. One notable and recent exception is Davies (2010), who provides a generally admirable aesthetic and historical overview of the subject, but whose most useful insight, building on Bill Nichols’s (1991) pioneering research, is that the committed documentary must be analyzed through four interconnected frames: (1) the filmmaker’s intentionality, (2) the film as text, (3) the viewer’s relationship to non-fiction images—these three all taken from Nichols—and (4) “the specific ‘context’ within which a particular film or corpus of films were made and circulated” (Davies, 2010, p. 13).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Winston (1995) convincingly demonstrates that as early as 1898 and 1914, respectively, both the Polish cinematographer Boleslaw Matuszewski and American photographer and filmmaker Edward S. Curtis had explicitly theorized the documentary as a distinct cinematic form characterized by the virtue of ethnographic or anthropological authenticity. In fact, he writes, “by 1914, at the latest, Curtis was using term ‘documentary work’ in a *clearly Griersonian sense*” (p. 9). This is to say nothing of the romantic “imperialism” of Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934), and other works, already well established by the time of Grierson’s first major writing, and an acknowledged artistic influence on Grierson (Winston, 1995, pp. 20-21). Grierson’s theoretical innovation, then, should be seen as an elaboration on an already-existing body of work, which has been granted historical precedence by virtue of his institutional authority, educational background, and the fact that, unlike Matuszewski, he wrote in English.

<sup>12</sup> Another such “attempt” to write a comprehensive history of the committed documentary might be glimpsed in Thomas Waugh’s mammoth volume, *The Conscience of Cinema: The Works of Joris Ivens, 1926-1989* (2016), which uses the six-decade career of one of the few auteurs of the form

Of course, insisting on materially situating a cultural object hardly constitutes a theoretical breakthrough, but explicitly putting this idea in dialogue with Nichols's schema is helpful nonetheless. As I suggest above, I believe it is still Waugh (1984) who provides the most useful analytical tool for the identification and evaluation of committed documentary with his concept of "political use-value." Unfortunately, this is a term that comes up only a handful of times in his work, and which, probably because it is seemingly so straightforward, he has neglected to define in systematic terms. Most obviously, it borrows from the political economic concept of use-value—the actual utility or purpose of a thing—in distinction from exchange-value, or that which makes a thing comprehensible and interchangeable as a commodity. There are also moments in Waugh's writings when he approvingly draws on other thinkers in the committed tradition. Writing on *Misère au Borinage* (Joris Ivens & Henri Storck, 1934), for instance, Waugh cites a passage from Benjamin on the danger of aestheticizing poverty that might offer further clarification: "What we must demand from the photographer is the ability to put such a caption beneath his [*sic*] picture as will rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it *revolutionary use-value*" (quoted in Waugh, 2016, p. 186; emphasis added). Based on this evidence, I argue that the aesthetics of political use-value is first and foremost concerned with the political utility of a documentary, which implies an entire gamut of questions of strategy, political line, and organization, in addition to the more familiar cinematic problems of distribution and exhibition. At the same time, the distinction implied between political use-value and the exchange-function (and therefore the commodity fetish) implies a potential secondary level, a utopian dimension that may not in every, or even in *most* cases, be actualized, but which is nevertheless urgently present as a possibility.

Such a concept points back to the earliest iterations of committed documentary in the U.S., which came out of the turmoil of the Depression and ideologically ran the gamut from revolutionary agitation and consciousness-raising to outright anti-communist propaganda and puff-pieces for the Roosevelt administration. On the far left of that continuum was the Communist Party-affiliated Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL). Drawing inspiration from the Soviet documentary tradition as well as the partisan journalism already found in *The Daily Worker* and other Party publications, the League

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as a spine to trace the relationship between documentary and the Left across the expanse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

produced newsreels and compilation films to fill the gap in truthful images of the working class left by the bourgeois media (Alexander, 1981). Filmmaker and critic Samuel Brody (2016) argued at the time, “We are forging the film into a working class weapon. And workers’ films will be most art when they are most weapon” (2016, p. 247). The sharpness of Brody’s rhetoric might suggest an aesthetic in line with the revolutionary, affective conception of mimesis that Gaines (1999) proposes might animate the viewer to political action in some forms of agitprop, but the actual documentary practice of the WFPL and its offshoots Nykino and Frontier Films hews closer to the strategic construction of a revolutionary proletarian counterpublic sphere.

Jonathan Kahana (2008) argues persuasively for understanding the history of American social documentary as a history of the ideological circulation of various competing forms of knowledge within and between various publics and counterpublics. Kahana follows the post-Habermasian reconfiguration of public sphere theory proposed by Michael Warner (2002), who contends that publics are spheres of highly mediated social interaction, self-constituted in history, which develop through the production, circulation, consumption, and critique of texts of various forms. In this sense, publics are constituted by an “ideology of reading,” or in the case of documentary, watching and listening (Warner, 2002, p. 123). The circulation of different kinds of committed documentaries might, then, form the basis for a specific form of oppositional public, or counterpublic, which Warner defines as “spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely” (p. 122). Commitment, however, implies a movement beyond the social imaginary to which the documentary and its public are bound. Collective action is not abstract, but concrete.

This sort of militancy in U.S. documentary is registered during the 1960s and 1970s by film writers like Chuck Kleinhans (1984), John Hess (1985), David E. James (1989), Nichols (1980), and others.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is perhaps the French critic Guy

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<sup>13</sup> Radical film journals such as *Jump Cut*, edited by Hess, Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage; *Cineaste*, co-edited by Dan Georgakas, a critic, political writer, and fellow traveler of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers; and *CinémAction*, edited and published by Guy Henneble, were important homes for committed film criticism and the early appreciation of political documentary at a moment when political consideration of film was dominated by the structural Marxism, semiotic theory, and psychoanalytic focus of densely theoretical journals like *Screen*, *October*, and *Artforum*. *Jump Cut*, in particular, was home to a strong wave of Marxist feminist theory and criticism, as well as being one of the first venues to include serious work on the emerging queer cinema, publishing the likes of Lesage, Michelle Citron, Linda Gordon, E. Ann Kaplan, and B. Ruby Rich, and Waugh.

Hennebelle (1984) who provides the most interesting, or at least the most audacious, analysis of the period in his report on the relationship of the post-1968 *cinéma engagé*, categorized into complex a taxonomy of committed forms, to the various competing currents in the French Left at the time. “Militant cinema,” Hennebelle suggests, “can exercise four different functions: to *arouse* spectators’ enthusiasm for a given problem; to *exhort* targeted audiences toward one or more determined actions; to *instill* in spectators a political culture; to help people *unmask* the enemy’s tricks” (p. 175; emphasis added). Moreover, he argues, the problem of committed documentary as such must be addressed from the ultimate perspective of the communist party. As an anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist, Hennebelle did not recognize the existence of a “truly revolutionary communist party” in France at the time of writing (1976), but he suggests that even under such circumstances committed filmmakers should continue producing revolutionary films according to those standards posed by the conjuncture, until such time as they can be “tied directly to a party’s strategy” (p. 175). The question of the party, which to my knowledge has never been asked so forthrightly in any English language committed documentary scholarship about the New Left era, suggests something of a practical limit point, beyond which the disciplinary boundaries dividing documentary, media, political theory and history, social movements, et al. break down in response to the object of study. Nevertheless, I argue that it is towards this ostensible impasse that a documentary aesthetics of political use-value points, as I will demonstrate over the coming chapters through an examination of the committed documentary practices of the late New Left.

Commitment as a political stance from which the artist, intellectual, or cultural worker participates in cultural production and dissemination, I argue, is a necessary precondition for ensuring a robust political documentary and visual culture. However, as I have implied above, “commitment” as such does not guarantee that this cinema will be possessed of a truly *revolutionary*, *mass*, or *popular* character. While certainly a necessary and constitutive element, it is insufficient insofar as the committed filmmaker cannot effectively and generatively contribute to a collective revolutionary politics without at the same time assuming some degree of responsibility (and in some cases even strategic or ideological adherence) to a disciplined organization that can learn from and

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The feminist and gay and lesbian counter-cinemas to which they contributed constituted major fronts of committed documentary in the ‘70s and ‘80s, which are unfortunately outside of the scope of this project.

absorb the concerns of workers, people of colour, gender oppressed peoples, and other groups structurally oppressed or exploited under capitalism; rearticulate these concerns analytically and in the form of concrete strategy; identify on the basis of this analysis and strategy where and for what purposes committed documentaries should be produced; and help to facilitate networks of distribution and mediate the physical and social context of spectatorship such that these films actually return to the people about and for whom they were made. The commitment of the organic intellectual to the struggles of the masses should at the same time represent a commitment to the organizational apparatuses that are popularly recognized as or are dedicated to substantively serving and providing political leadership to the masses. With the fragmentation of the student, anti-war, and Civil Rights mass movements at the close of the 1960s, I argue that it was in many instances the revolutionary communist organization—the pre-party formation, the party, and the affiliated mass organization—that attempted to step into the breach and play this organizational role.

## **1.5. Agenda**

The political and cultural moment covered by this thesis spans a very short period of time, approximately half a decade between the final weeks of 1967 and the final weeks of 1972. This moment, I argue, constituted a fundamental pivot in the general orientation of the far left in the United States. But as I will make clear, this pivot also marked the functional conclusion of the relationship between most committed documentarians and leading revolutionary organizations of the day. This study will analyze key committed documentary interventions within the workers' and black liberation movements by filmmakers, either from inside these revolutionary organizations or within their spheres of influence, beginning with the symbolic height of the American New Left in 1968 and proceeding through the rank-and-file workers' rebellions and the beginning of the New Communist Movement during the early 1970s.

Chapter 2 examines the central role played by the Newsreel organization in documenting and rhetorically visualizing the theoretical and strategic problems plaguing the New Left, and particularly the student movement embodied by Students for a Democratic Society, at the moment of what was by most conventional accounts the

height of their revolutionary élan and mobilizing capacity. Nevertheless, the flexibility of the often undefined revolutionary consciousness that had served them so well up to this point was beginning to weaken and fracture, as activists began to seek a unifying theory that could encompass the war in Vietnam, the oppression of blacks in America, and the growing recognition of capitalism as a system fundamentally built on dispossession and exploitation. Furthermore, the movement was searching to identify a central political subject who could lead the revolutionary movement forward, a search that was racialized both in ways they realized and others they did not. In 1968, on opposite sides of the country, New York Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel produced a pair of documentaries entitled, respectively, *Columbia Revolt* and *Black Panther*. These films, I argue, provide competing visions for the future of the movement, one in which the majority white student movement carries forward the lessons it has learned on the campuses, and the other where the black ghetto is the new site of revolutionary struggle, and the surplus populations of the black working class and lumpenproletariat—last hired and first fired—the new revolutionary subjects.

The determination of the precise political characteristics of the black working class forms the central problematic of Chapter 3, which explores the militant black-led class struggle in the Detroit auto industry at the end of the 1960s through the lens of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' *Finally Got the News* (1970). In particular, I am concerned with assessing the role played by this documentary in the struggle for leadership within the League. Although officially the League was Marxist-Leninist in its principles, as a mass organization working in the plants its membership included workers representing a number of differing political, and in some cases apolitical, positions. One of the areas of greatest discord was over the interpretation of racism and blackness as social phenomena; indeed, it was so central a question to the movement that the position one took was seen as highly determinative of one's organizational practices and political program. I argue that *Finally Got the News*, which was produced by an influential faction within the League's leadership, represented a concrete step towards attempting to consolidate their hegemony within the organization by consciously promoting their own political line on the racial issue.

Finally, Chapter 4 deals with one of the most important groups of the New Communist Movement, the October League (Marxist-Leninist) (OL), and its self-produced documentary *Wildcat at Mead* (1972), about a wildcat strike at a paper

packaging plant in Atlanta during the summer of 1972, which the OL played a central role in. While nominally a straightforward account of the strike from the OL's perspective, the film also situates itself as an agent of mediation between the communist organization and the more reformist and social democratic leadership of the city's black civil rights community, with whom the OL developed an at times strained relationship as a result of political differences and a media redbaiting campaign against the strike. The content and tone of the documentary, I argue, can best be understood in the context of the OL's adherence to the united front political strategy, which was necessary for a majority white organization such as theirs to make inroads with the Southern black working class during this period.

This thesis can in no way be considered an exhaustive accounting of the late New Left, the New Communist Movement, their cultural worlds or publics. All I claim to represent in this study is the short period of overlap between the great wave of committed documentary production initiated by the political energies and desires of the 1960s, and the complex, sometimes contradictory, often bullheaded and fatally flawed second coming of a certain kind of Marxism-Leninism in the United States that followed it. Less than ten years earlier, no self-respecting student activist would have been caught dead with a Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, or Mao text on them. And yet, somehow, over the course of a decade, the "five heads" became mandatory reading. And for a while, people filmed it.



## Chapter 2.

### Newsreel: Propaganda Arsenal of the Late New Left?

*Newsreel, for me, is the constant challenge of facing choices which are at once, and indissolubly film-making choices, political choices, activist choices, aesthetic choices. None of us are satisfied with the blend that emerges ... how to make what we want? Films as weapons? (Historical phrase—badly weathered.) Bullets kill, and some films get into people's heads, to shock, stun, arrest, horrify, depress, sadden, probe, demand. We want that kind of engagement—films people can't walk away from, with "Oh yes, I saw a filmshow last night, sort of political."*

— Norman Fruchter, "Newsreel" (1969)

*At this point in history, SDS is faced with its most crucial ideological decision, that of determining its direction with regards to the working class.*

— Mike Klonsky, "Toward a Revolutionary Youth Movement" (1968)

The mainstream narrative of the New Left, popularized by former activists with an axe to grind like Todd Gitlin (1987), is that the movement blossomed in the early years of the 1960s as the twin democratic forces of the student and black freedom movements converged, crystalized as the domestic struggle against the war in Vietnam took off, and finally went into a state of decline and decay as increasingly militant ideologies and violent tactics came to the forefront, before shattering completely at the end of the decade. This historical telling has numerous problems, not the least of which is the pseudo-tragic and moralistic teleology at its heart, but at the most basic level what it gets wrong is the idea that this is where the story ends, or at least where it stops being worth telling. By this logic, the wave of committed documentary filmmaking explicitly associated with the New Left and many of its leading organizations came about just in time to chronicle the end of the era. In actuality, however, these radical filmmakers, collectives, and production companies were witnesses to an important juncture in the

transformation of the New Left, as its leading elements did indeed seek out new organizational forms and political strategies to replace an existing politics that had proven inadequate to what activists were increasingly seeing as a properly revolutionary situation facing the United States. And behind this problem of establishing new political forms lay the question, not always explicitly articulated by those in the movement, of what groups were best suited to carrying out or leading the revolutionary struggle against U.S. capitalism and imperialism. Committed documentary was but one arena where this question could be visualized, scrutinized, and subjected to political debate within the counterpublic sphere of the existing movement and the subaltern communities it was beginning to reach out to.

The most important of the late New Left filmmaking bodies was Newsreel, a collective originally formed in New York in late 1967 that quickly expanded to into a decentralized organization with active chapters across the country. Thanks to its access to resources and deep connections with groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Newsreel was able to compile a large catalogue of both self-produced and international revolutionary films on a range of topics, making it central to the production and distribution of revolutionary film in the U.S. Of Newsreel's own works, I will focus in particular on two films produced by the organization's most active New York and San Francisco chapters: *Columbia Revolt* (Melvin Margolis, et al., 1968) and *Black Panther* (Robert Lacativa, Robert Machover, & Paul Shinoff, 1968). The importance of these two works, besides their relative popularity, resides in their common, though differently articulated focus on the historical problematic of conceptualizing class struggle through its primary mediating forms—the student movement versus racial or national oppression, respectively—which I argue was the primary theoretical question facing revolutionary forces during this conjuncture. *Columbia Revolt*, which deals with the student movement in relation to the black freedom struggle, transcodes and legitimizes the essential whiteness of its student subject through implicit recourse to the controversial “new working class” thesis, a theory of intellectual labour popular in some SDS circles at the time. *Black Panther*, by comparison, centres the precariously employed or unemployed, criminalized, and oppressed black working class. On the basis of its more tenuous access to formal wage labour and bourgeois standards of social reproduction within the self-contained nuclear family, this racialized working class is conceptualized, following the theory and practice of the Black Panther Party, in the analytically ambiguous

terminology of the lumpenproletariat. If race is “the modality in which class is ‘lived,’” as Stuart Hall (1980, p. 341) has famously suggested, it is also the basis of a particular conceptual problematic with profound implications for political organization and practice.

These Newsreel productions are deeply symptomatic theoretical and practical interventions in this sense; placed in dialogue with one another, they demonstrate how far actually existing cultural articulations of revolutionary class politics had shifted by the late 1960s from both the class ambivalence of the early New Left and the extant institutions and deracinated representations of proletarian life inherited from the traditional industrial labour and Communist movements.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.1. Newsreel, 1967-1971

The postwar development and circulation of synchronous-sound recording and heightened accessibility of lightweight 16mm cameras dramatically transformed the possibilities for independent film production, particularly documentaries. This democratically promising advance paralleled in cultural and technological terms the dramatic social transformations then overtaking American society. In the pages of *The Village Voice* in 1966, columnist and avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas rhapsodized on the utopian potentialities with of these new technologies,

With all the new techniques and technologies available to us, with almost weightless and almost invisible cameras, 8 mm. and 16 mm., and with sound, we can go today into any place we want and put everything on film. Why do we neglect film journalism? Eight mm. movies should be secretly shipped from Vietnam; 8 mm. movies should be shipped from the South; 8 mm. movies taken by the ten-year-old Harlem kids armed not with guns but 8 mm. cameras—let’s flash them on our theatre screens, our home screens; 8 mm. movies smuggled out of prisons, of insane asylums, everywhere, everywhere. There should be no place on earth not covered by 8 mm. movies, no place without the buzzing of our cameras! Let’s show

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<sup>14</sup> The capital “C” in Communist was a common linguistic marker to distinguish Soviet-aligned Communist Parties with historical roots in the Comintern era from other communist projects, such as those articulating an anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism inspired by the Communist Party of China. Even research staff for the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Internal Security observed this distinction, noting that SDS leaders Mike Klonsky and Bernardine Dohrn identified as communists and “insisted that the word be spelled with a small ‘c’ to distinguish SDS leadership from that of the disciplined Communist organizations such as the Communist Party” (U.S. House, 1969, p. 133).

everything, everything. We can do it today. *We have to go through this, so that we can go to other things.* (2016, p. 502; emphasis added)

The desire for a cinema that could not only go anywhere and see, but crucially could also *listen* as the world talked back to it, was seemingly made realizable in this newly available filmmaking equipment, representing an historically providential convergence of social energies and technological innovation. So while Mekas's fantasy of a total freedom to express through seeing and recording was ultimately not to come to fruition—at least not outside of the New York postwar avant-garde to which his work properly belongs<sup>15</sup>—it is certainly uncanny the degree to which the growth of a “buzzing” amateur and popular cinema would be realized over the next decade or so. Newsreel, with its relatively large resource base, national reach, and organizational connections to influential groups like SDS, was to play a leading role in this coming wave of documentary production.

The first meeting of the Newsreel organization was held on December 22, 1967 at the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York City. Avant-garde filmmakers Mekas and Melvin Margolis actually arranged this initial meeting not for the purposes of forming an ongoing group,<sup>16</sup> but because they sought to collate footage taken at the October 21 March on the Pentagon for a one-off collaborative film.<sup>17</sup> The high level of interest among local filmmakers and New Left organizers, however, almost immediately suggested a critical mass of will and know-how necessary for establishing a continuing news media project. Newsreel was formally incorporated with the State of New York as Camera News, Inc. on February 9, 1968, with Margolis, Marvin Fishman, Robert Kramer, Ellen Hirst, and Allan Siegel listed as directors (U.S. House, 1970, pp. 2388-2394). In the early running, New York Newsreel had approximately 30 members, mostly white, educated, middle class men, but divided vocationally between those who saw filmmaking principally as a means to facilitate hands-on organizing and others who saw cinema as a valuable end in-itself, with political efficacy desirable but not the sole or

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the historical relationship between the American avant-garde and underground cinemas and the political cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, see James (1989, p. 166-236).

<sup>16</sup> Despite being an enthusiastic early supporter of the project, Mekas himself did not participate in Newsreel in a filmmaking capacity. However, he is listed as a member of Newsreel's Coordinating Committee in an advertising bulletin published on 1 March 1968 (U.S. House, 1970, p. 2396).

<sup>17</sup> The Pentagon film would eventually become Newsreel #2, entitled *No Game* (Marvin Fishman and Masanori Oe, 1968).

even necessarily the primary goal (Young, 2006, pp. 103-106). At least in its publicity, however, the sort of language Newsreel used to promote itself clearly subordinated aesthetic considerations to the instrumental concerns of the movement, as in the following advertisement letter penned under Kramer's name in 1968:

THE NEWSREEL is a radical news service whose purpose is to provide an alternative to the limited and biased coverage offered by the media in the area of filmed news.

THE NEWSREEL is particularly concerned to put its films into the hands of organizers and activists who can find ways to *use films as tools in their daily political work*. So, we are building a "community distribution network," and we will provide our films free to those groups that cannot afford them. (Reproduced in U.S. House, 1970, p. 2396; emphasis added)

Chapters soon formed in other cities, including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco—the latter of which formed the base of Newsreel's western presence—as well as college towns like Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lawrence, Kansas; and Kingston and London, Ontario (Young, p. 101; Pulliam, 1972, p. 8). While levels of structure and commitment varied greatly from city to city, individual members were generally free to work as they pleased, without a unifying political line to structure output, so long as they had the financial means to cover production costs or could convince wealthier members or outside donors to contribute funds. Filmmaking training was limited, and many women and racialized members were shut out of the production process entirely, consigned instead to administrative tasks or fundraising, the latter sometimes entailing drug dealing or other petty crime. There was a pressure to build up a substantial catalogue of films as quickly as possible, so as to move the collective in the direction of financial self-sufficiency. This contributed to the rough, *vérité* formal quality that characterized most Newsreel productions.

The expansiveness of the Newsreel operation likely could not have been realized without the pre-existing political and logistical networks that united the various wings of the New Left and Civil Rights movements. Many production and distribution offices were shared with other organizations, and in some cases donations and other financial matters were funneled through sympathetic third parties. Influential newspapers and journals including *The Guardian* and the SDS-affiliated *New Left Notes* and *The*

# newsreel catalogue no. 4

NEWSREEL  
1541 Merrick  
Detroit, Mich. 48208  
(313) 833-7885

March 1969



"Congratulations on Your 10th Anniversary!"

Figure 1 – Cover of “Newsreel Catalogue No. 4”. 1969. Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

*Movement* carried advertisements and articles, and served as intermediary spaces for groups interested in exhibiting Newsreel films to inquire about the rates and availabilities of different prints. The extent of Newsreel's involvement with revolutionary elements in the New Left was such that the House Committee on Internal Security (formerly the House Un-American Activities Committee) saw fit to commit substantial resources to the investigation of Newsreel in the course of its 1969 hearings on SDS. Asked to comment by the Committee on the nature of Newsreel's affiliation with SDS, investigator Herbert Romerstein opined,

They do not have formal ties in the sense that there is an open, formal affiliation. Personnel of SDS and Newsreel are sometimes identical; offices of SDS are used for the dissemination of the Newsreel films and are often regional Newsreel offices. *I think we could accurately state that it is part of the propaganda arsenal of SDS.* (U.S. House, 1970, p. 2309; emphasis added)

Newsreel's impressive geographical scope was perhaps even exceeded by the rate of its expansion. A notice published in a July 1968 issue of *The Movement*, for instance, lists a robust network of 16 community distributors in 15 different cities, less than seven months after Newsreel's founding (reproduced in U.S. House, 1970, p. 2395). Most of the films in the Newsreel catalogue were produced, purposely or otherwise, to specifications lending themselves to non-traditional exhibition: for instance, black-and-white 16mm presentation, short to medium running time, inconsistent optical focus, and emphasis on expository or didactic dialogue and monologue. The abbreviated length of the films, in particular, encouraged facilitators to incorporate discussion and debate periods into the overall screening experience, extending the pedagogical faculties of the works beyond the confines of the pro-filmic presentation. These sorts of conversations could go in many directions depending on the audience, extending upwards from the film's manifest content into higher levels of abstraction, or back down into practice through the reappropriation of pro-filmic elements for thinking through new problems or concrete situations. (Or, just as often if not more so, sending the conversation in self-indulgent ideological circles.) Both Newsreel and local exhibitors were free to experiment with all manner of screening environments, from campus theatres, to private residences, to guerilla forms such as having "a truck fitted with rear screen projections [...] using the streets to show newsreels and other useful 'street films'" (Newsreel reproduced in U.S. House, 1970, p. 2395). A simple dormitory screening hosted by SDS at Georgetown University, at which *Black Panther* was

projected against a bed sheet in a hallway, was deemed sufficiently important to be the subject of multiple subpoenaed testimonies before the Committee on Internal Security (1969, pp. 124-126, 260-280, 338-359).

This institutional expansion might have been all for naught had Newsreel been unable to make use of it. As such, the most active locals quickly established practices characterized by condensed and overlapping production schedules. By the end of 1969, there were over 50 original Newsreel productions in circulation, supplemented by an enviable selection of international documentaries and newsreels, predominantly Latin American and Vietnamese, of which Newsreel was the sole or primary U.S. distributor (Young, 2006, p. 119). The production process in New York, which in spite of the national reach of the organization was still unquestionably the dominant chapter, was essentially controlled by a clique of members such as Kramer, Fruchter, and Robert Machover, all of whom came from petit bourgeois or bourgeois backgrounds and had prior independent film experience (Nichols, 1984, pp. 136-137). While the democratic imperatives of the organization mandated that all ideas or proposals “would be discussed among the entire group,” writes Cynthia A. Young, “those without independent means had to convince [this] powerful bloc of members to allocate Newsreel funds,” a gatekeeping measure that rarely applied in practice to those members with their hands on the purse strings (2006, p. 113). Nevertheless, Young continues, in certain cases the collective decision-making structure could in fact override the material inequalities embedded in the organization:

After production was nearly complete, films went through a final vetting process, and those that the group agreed on were distributed as Newsreel films. This final approval process largely determined a film’s fate. For instance, *America ’68* by Fruchter and [John] Douglas was deemed “too cerebral” by a Newsreel majority, so very few prints were made and circulated. (2006, p. 113)

Such instances were rare, however, and it is important to note that this vetting process was able to exert a degree of collective discipline over the filmmakers only *after* the resources and time had already been committed, and not earlier in the pre-production stage when they could have been diverted towards a collectively agreeable project.

Despite their preeminence, economic and social privilege should not be mistaken for the sole bases of the Kramer clique’s power and influence within Newsreel circles.



This material power was mediated to a significant degree by the social capital these members enjoyed as active political organizers and filmmakers in the New Left milieu prior to the formation of Newsreel. Fruchter and Kramer in particular had political backgrounds going back to the early 1960s. They first collaborated in 1964 organizing the Newark Community Union Project, a major anti-poverty initiative in community base-building funded through the SDS Radical Education Project (U.S. House, 1970, p. 2308).<sup>18</sup> With Douglas they would later participate as press in a 1969 American Committee for Solidarity with the Vietnamese People delegation to North Vietnam, during which they also helped to oversee the release of two American prisoners of war. Footage shot during this trip was seized by customs upon their return to the U.S., after which they successfully sued the government to secure its retrieval (U.S. House, 1970, pp. 2296-2297). The result of this process was the widely celebrated documentary *People's War* (John Douglas, Norman Fruchter, Robert Kramer, 1969), the notoriety of which was no doubt boosted by the Newsreel representatives' very public legal battles and the uniqueness of the project. As Young notes, *People's War* was the first American film ever photographed entirely in liberated Vietnam (2006, p. 113). The social capital held by this leading clique, in conjunction with the relative economic power they commanded, formed the material basis for divisions within the New York organization that would eventually split the group in two.

Christine Choy, who in 1970 became the first woman of colour to join New York Newsreel, would later term the division between this white, moneyed, and trained clique and the other members a broad division between "the have and the have-nots" (Millner, 1985, p. 158). It was a partition in practice that would eventually become formalized in 1971 when the chapter split, amidst a long period of criticism and self-criticism, into semi-autonomous caucuses. The chastised white caucus soon dissolved, while the racialized caucus, which reformed itself as (the still active) Third World Newsreel, became the primary bearer of the Newsreel legacy in the post-New Left period. Between 1968 and 1969, however, New York operated unequally according to the "essentially amorphous, ultrademocratic structure" reflecting anti-Leninist attitudes prevalent throughout the New Left and counterculture (Nichols, 1984, p. 138). The irony of this

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<sup>18</sup> The Newark project would form the basis of Fruchter and Machover's medium-length documentary *Troublemakers* (1966), an interesting examination of white organizing within the black community and a useful cinematic model for how to systemize and articulate strategic lessons from political experiences.

“ultrademocracy” should be clear, as it is precisely the non-hierarchical structure at the level of organizational discipline that helped facilitate, under the guise of formal horizontalism, the class, race, and gender hierarchies that plagued the organization. And it was these hierarchies that essentially allowed Kramer, Fruchter, and the others to run Newsreel as a pet project during this initial period. The early productions to come out of New York bear the stamp of these stratifications. The content they deal with for the most part concerns the student movement and white-led New Left organizations, although in many cases these topics are actually local mediations of the more universalizing theme of anti-war and anti-imperialist resistance to the Vietnam War.

The abiding political concerns that characterized the Newsreel catalogue had a formal parallel in the troubling assumption made by many leading members, bordering on paternalism, about the intellectual and cultural formation of the publics to which their films were ostensibly addressed. This assumption was expressed in the theoretical conclusion that a fundamentally confrontational aesthetic was necessary for circumventing passive viewership practices. The emphasis on confrontation makes sense historically when it is understood as a radicalization of the direct cinema techniques then in vogue among more liberal or non-political counterculture filmmakers like the Maysles brothers or D.A. Pennebaker. It merely trades their less immediately obtrusive, empirical gaze for a jarring, “*battle footage*” realism meant to stimulate, as Kramer put it in a 1969 essay, “*disgust/violent disagreement/painful recognition/jolts*” (Fruchter, Buck, Ross, & Kramer, 2016, p. 555, 553; emphasis in original). Where this theorization begins to go astray is in the belief that such a quick and dirty style somehow grants the films a more authentically “proletarian” or “Third World” character. Such a strategic generalization is not necessarily a fatal flaw, especially considering the high degree of politicization in American society at this moment, but it contributed in part to a broader failure of the New Left to reckon with the precise balance of social forces in the class struggle. Consequently, Newsreel struggled to develop an appropriate political address that would articulate its potential audiences as fighting counterpublics on the basis of their actual race and class coordinates. This problem was especially vexing with regard to white audiences.<sup>19</sup> Kramer is worth quoting at length here:

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<sup>19</sup> *Black Panther*, as I argue below, is a helpful example of how this issue could be overcome through the collaborative subordination of the filmmakers’ aims to the explicit political needs of a

In regard to our films. I think we argue a different hierarchy of values. Not traditional canons of “what is professional,” what is “comprehensive and intelligent reportage,” what is “acceptable quality and range of material.” No. Nor do we accept a more sophisticated argument about propaganda in general: that if the product isn’t sold well, if the surface of the film (grainy, troublesome sound, soft-focus, a wide range of maladies that come up when you are filming under stress) alienates, then the subject population never even gets to your “message” about the product—they just say, “Fuck that, I’m not watching that shit.”

The subject population in this society, bombarded by and totally immersed in complex, ostensibly “free” media, has learned to absorb all facts/information relatively easily. Within the formats now popularized by the television documentary, you can lodge almost any material, no matter how implicitly explosive, with the confidence that it will neither haunt the subject population, nor push them to move—in the streets, in their communities, in their heads. You see [Black Panthers Eldridge] Cleaver or [Bobby] Seale on a panel show, and they don’t scare you or impress you or make you think as they would if you met them on the street. Why? Because they can’t get their hands on you? Partly, sure. (Fear and committed thought exist in terms of the threat that power will be used against you—in terms of the absolute necessity of figuring out what has to be done—not in terms of some vague decision to “think it through” in isolation.) But also, because their words are absorbed by the format of the “panel show,” rational (note well: ostensibly rational) discussion about issues that we all agree are important and pressing, and that we (all good liberal viewers) are committed to analyzing. Well: bullshit. The illusion of the commitment to analyze. The illusion of real dissent. The illusion of even understanding the issues. Rather, the commitment to pretend that we’re engaging reality. (Fruchter, Buck, Ross, & Kramer, 2016, pp. 552-553; italicized in original)

While perceptive about the capacity of bourgeois media forms to ideologically capture and reify critical or revolutionary ideas as objects for contemplation, Kramer vacillates somewhat by presupposing an aesthetic appropriate to the alleged taste of working class audiences while simultaneously invoking the image of a middle class shocked out of its doldrums. Aesthetic shock equals revolutionary interpolation. Symptomatically, the might be understood as an attempt to square the circle of dealing with a largely anti-communist, patriarchal, often racist, and consumerist white working class at odds with the countercultural attitudes of the student and anti-war movements, directly actually naming it as such. Indeed, we are given no reason to suppose that the “subject population” Kramer refers to is anything but the majority-white proletariat, that supposed relic of the disavowed Old Left. This imprecise theorization in Newsreel’s early

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revolutionary organization. In this case, of course, the primary counterpublic in question is black, not white.

class politics found its vehicle in the popular concept of a new working class, which had been influential in the student movement under different names throughout the 1960s, but gained new life among leading SDSers in early 1967. What it proposes, essentially, is that this “new working class, unlike the traditional working class, is made up of those people with ‘technical, clerical, and professional jobs that require educational backgrounds’ and of those in the schools and universities who provide them with those backgrounds,” and furthermore, that the new working class would play a leading role in the revolution to come (Sale, 1973, p. 338). The rejection of the industrial working class was not a rejection of these particular workers as incapable of political activity, but a rejection of the proletariat as an overdetermined *figure*.

As I argue further below, this political turn constituted a regressive turn away from the actually-existing working class, and towards an historically emergent, professional fragment of the petit bourgeoisie. This turn represented an analytical and political aporia that could not be overcome by continuing on in this direction. However, it would also dialectically help to expose another side of this coin, the racialized figure of the lumpenproletariat, which through its equally uncertain relation to means of production and the sale of labour power, would point the way through its own limitations towards a renewed working class politics in the 1970s.

## **2.2. *Columbia Revolt* and the “New Working Class”**

*Columbia Revolt* (Melvin Margolis, et al., 1968) is exemplary of the political confusion wrought by the student movement’s misconstrued class analysis. The film documents the student occupation in April 1968 of five administrative and educational buildings at Columbia in response to the land-rich University’s plans to replace the lone public park in Harlem with a private gymnasium. At 50 minutes in length, *Columbia Revolt* is one of the longest productions from Newsreel’s early period, which gives it breathing room to indulge a diversity of narrative threads, establishing an editing rhythm that is brisk yet more relaxed than the staccato clip characteristic of some shorter works. Sequences such as those depicting the carnivalesque destruction of administrative paperwork and the impromptu wedding of two student occupiers indulge the countercultural elements of the collective and create a palpable sense of the occupation as a utopian, prefigurative



**Figure 2 – Wedding in occupied building. *Columbia Revolt* (Melvin Margolis, et al., 1968). Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.**

undertaking. What this utopianism sometimes elides, however, are the concrete conditions and demands of the black residents of Harlem in whose name the action was ostensibly undertaken. While it was black community organizations that first took the lead role in fighting Columbia's exploitative landlordism, most of the protesters depicted on-screen are students, and most of them are white (four of the five buildings were majority white-occupied during the multi-day action). Images of black rebellion, which appear primarily in the form of wide crowd shots of the Harlem community gathered outside the occupied buildings, are interspersed throughout the film to give context and legitimacy to the actions of the identifiable white subjects inside. They are not invisible, but anonymized in their collectivity—and not a collectivity that achieves social agency via formal mechanisms as in, for instance, the montage-driven, world-historical crowd scenes in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), or *October (Ten Days That Shook the World)* (1927). It is primarily the white students' experiences and

activities that the film is preoccupied with, despite—or perhaps because—the editor and directors had access to such a wide array of material collected from the five separate camera crews on the ground.

The racialized logic of dispossession undergirding Columbia's plan thus becomes unconsciously reproduced in the construction and political use-value of the film. "The focus is on the white students whose mass militant action was designed to expose a corrupt, hypocritical system for what it was, radicalize others by their action and thence swell their own ranks," contends Nichols (1972, p. 78). Young (2006) goes further, arguing, "Once this larger context is evacuated, *Columbia Revolt* can only represent the takeover as a struggle against society writ larger, rather than a specific battle steeped in a long-standing history of institutional neglect and exploitation" (p. 112). It is a sort of "bad totalization" that skips from the concrete locality of the Columbia action to a general critique of American empire as an abstraction, without doing the proper analytical work of identifying the mediations that constitute this relation, nor bringing the focus back to the political locality of Harlem once the relation has been established. It essentially translates, in other words, to setting aside the very people whose lives are being concretely structured and dominated by that abstraction in the first place.

While the filmmakers' focus on the actions of the white students arguably comprises a racist representation of the occupation action in the context of the broader Harlem campaign, as a particular expression it is symptomatic—or as Nichols (1972) puts it, "barometric"—of the New Left as such at this moment (p. 52). While the Movement certainly took inspiration from the struggles of the Vietnamese, Cubans, Chinese, and racialized groups in the U.S., the overall theoretical interpretation of American capitalism and imperialism still lacked a coherent theory of how the former grounded the latter. The primary attempt to resolve this deficiency came in the form of the non-Marxist notion of students and intellectuals as constituting a new working class. This theory, according to SDS leader Carl Davidson, came in "two apparently opposite forms in its view of contemporary class structure: either 'the proletariat is disappearing' or 'everyone is a proletarian,'" which nevertheless dovetailed in their mutual "obfuscation of the intelligensia [*sic*] as a social strata standing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie" (1972). Thus, the invocation of the signifier "proletariat" in naming this figure should not be thought of as identifying a unique class formation with an objective *economic* role in the mode of production, but instead a collective *political* subject

conscious of its historical interests. In other words, it is a political definition of class without an economic basis. The aporia of the new working class thesis was to become clear before long.

With the anti-communist purges initiated by the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) and the stagnation and consolidation of business unionism in the internal and external political life of the AFL-CIO unions, the somewhat unexpected emergence of the university as a centre for militant organizing no doubt made the student as a new political figure an enticing proposition. These students were young, educated, ideologically committed, and in many cases not (yet) dependent on the scraps that capital had to toss their way.<sup>20</sup> What was eventually to come of this new vanguard, however, was the inevitable filtering out of large numbers of these students into the workforce along class lines that would take determinative precedent over the politicized campus cultures they were leaving. The 1960s generation of educated students were not a distinct class and, on the basis of their transient relationship to the university as a politicized institution, could not constitute a lasting political subject in themselves. Rather, their emergence was indicative of changing arrangements of composition within the already existing class order. While most entered the working class proper upon graduation or shortly thereafter, others settled upwards into the class fraction Nicos Poulantzas classifies as the new petit bourgeoisie: “non-productive wage-earners, i.e. groups such as commercial and bank employees, office and services workers, etc., in short all those who are commonly referred to as ‘white collar’ or ‘tertiary sector’ workers” (1978, p. 193).

Unlike the small property owners of the traditional petit bourgeoisie, Poulantzas argues, this group of professionals first emerged with the development of monopoly capitalism—managers, scientists, engineers, academics, et al. They *are* wage labourers in the technical sense, but non-productive in their labour, and materially and ideologically differentiated from the proletariat on the basis of wage differentials and other material benefits of their positions, as well as the tendency to perform mental rather than manual

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<sup>20</sup> This turn away from the industrial proletariat cannot be fully understood without taking into account the lingering anti-Soviet mentality on much of the American Left. Contributing factors included the New Left’s general distaste for the centralism of the Old Left (i.e., CPUSA); the ongoing ideological force of anti-communism in the U.S.; the Soviet military interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968); and the nascent expression of anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism appearing in the work of influential organizations such as Progressive Labor (PL), which aggressively entered the loosely structured SDS as a disciplined caucus and nearly succeeded in overthrowing the national leadership at the 1968 convention.



**Figure 3 – White students address the crowds. *Columbia Revolt* (Melvin Margolis, et al., 1968). Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.**

labour (1978, pp. 193-204; 251-270). They are like the traditional segment of this class in that the political loyalties and imperatives of the new petit bourgeoisie are polarized between capital and labour. Their labour is often controlled, purchased, and alienated by the former, but they are incentivized to maintain class independence from the latter. *Columbia Revolt's* comparative representations of the progressive white students— aspirant petit bourgeoisie, many of them—and the precariously working class black community of Harlem do not illuminate this potential polarization, but instead present it as a sort of united front. The multi-racial figure it proposes is a productive step forward, but it is not considered such that it can produce an enduring politics.

In the last instance, *Columbia Revolt* reveals itself to be concerned with establishing the class coordinates for the revolutionary movement as it was developing



in 1968, in the ostensible absence of a strong working class movement.<sup>21</sup> But it does so in heavily racial terms, the consequences of which the filmmakers do not seem quite capable of handling, either within the film or historically in New York Newsreel's internal practice. Even more damningly, it cannot conceive a structure of political leadership that recognizes the primacy of black-led class struggle in anything but name. The still-hegemonic theoretical orientation against the "traditional" working class which framed the political horizon of the moment meant that the filmmakers and participants were essentially trapped by a binary choice of white education or black impoverishment, and could not go beyond the racial terms of this division to conceptualize the objective character of inter- and intra-class relations underlying their potential class unity, let alone build a multi-national or multi-racial working class subject. Faced with the different social groups in the (ideologically petit bourgeois) Columbia student body and the (proletarian and lumpen) community of Harlem, *Columbia Revolt* implicitly looks to the former as credible agents, while paying lip service to and seeking legitimacy from the positionality of the latter. "The whites were inspired by the militancy of the blacks and credited them with being the vanguard of the strike," writes Nichols (1972), "They adopted the militancy, however, without its purpose: militancy itself became an end rather than stopping work on the gym or mustering community support" (p. 78).

### **2.3. *Black Panther*: "No More Brothers in Jail"**

The financial success of *Columbia Revolt*, through the rental and sale of 16mm prints, was hugely important to establishing Newsreel's solvency and reputation, as well as reaffirming the New York chapter's leading national position. The other most popular film of the period was San Francisco Newsreel's *Black Panther*, known colloquially as *Off the Pig!* (1968). Fittingly, this militant portrait of the Black Panther Party (BPP) embodies the flip side of Newsreel's early output; it is more aesthetically representative of Newsreel

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<sup>21</sup> The assumed non-existence of actually-existing workers' struggle, which was commonly held throughout large swaths of the New Left, was of course incorrect. Workplace violence and intensifying exploitation were on the rise across U.S. industry, as was rank-and-file resistance to both capitalist pressures and union inertia.



**Figure 4 – Huey P. Newton. *Black Panther* (Robert Lacativa, Robert Machover, & Paul Shinoff, 1968). San Francisco Newsreel.**

and unusually successful in execution and distribution. It also foregrounds a very different political subject, and consequently endorses a divergent political program.

At a lean 15 minutes, *Black Panther* was ideal as a recruiting and propaganda tool for the BPP, and it was not uncommon for the film to be screened at Party meetings (Young, 2006, p. 117). It is fast-paced, and foregrounds much of the cultural imagery and rhetoric usually associated with the Black Panthers. The filmmakers portray different elements of the BPP's carefully considered iconography, including Panthers marching in formation, members dressed in the familiar black leather jackets and berets, and the striking, graphic illustrations of Minister of Culture Emory Douglas. Just as central to the Party's political image are the faces and voices of leaders Huey P. Newton (Minister of Defense), Eldridge Cleaver (Minister of Information), and Bobby Seale (Chairman), all of

whom are prominently depicted at various points making didactic analytical and programmatic statements for the camera in close-up or medium close-up.

The novelty and unapologetic bluntness of the Panthers' politics cannot be overstated, especially given the aesthetic romanticism and iconoclasm that has threatened to engulf their popular memory. Newton and Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland in 1966 as an armed community self-defense unit, but the Panthers very quickly began to expand and take on the characteristics of an actual revolutionary party, which despite the name was not necessarily given in their early practice. In fact, they were one of the first U.S. organizations after 1956 to claim a vanguard role in the revolutionary movement, and their claim was widely recognized by white communists.<sup>22</sup> The SDS-progeny Revolutionary Union (RU), for instance, which also began in the Bay Area, actually encouraged potential black recruits to join the Panthers instead, both out of deference and a recognition of the strategic positionality of the black working class and the leading role of the Black Panthers within that milieu. RU leader Bob Avakian summed up this position in a 1968 speech, in which he declared,

[T]hey're the ones who taught us. They're the ones that forced us to face the reality of what America and this system was all about. And in this sense, we say, not only are black people a vanguard, but they are an inspiration. We don't expect them to liberate us, we have to do that for ourselves. But they have inspired us to begin that struggle to end this imperialist, racist, colonial system once and for all. (Quoted in Leonard and Gallagher, 2014, p. 28)

At the same time, the Panthers and other black revolutionaries faced significant condescension from the very group who professed their allegiance to this vanguard. SDS, which in 1969 voted to recognize the Black Panther Party's historical vanguard leadership of the American revolutionary movement, at around the same time rejected two major overtures by the Panthers to collaborate in national coalitions, first in a propagandist presidential election campaign to unite BPP and SDS leaders on a single

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<sup>22</sup> 1956 was a major turning point in the history of the communist movement. Near the beginning of year Khrushchev gave his so-called "Secret Speech" before the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Then, in November, the Soviet military intervened against the popular uprising in Hungary, further alienating many in the Western parties. The revelations about the Stalin era, in conjunction with Khrushchev's actions in Hungary, caused catastrophic damage for the already weakened and politically repressed CPUSA. Taken together, these incidents became a boon for popular anti-communism in the United States.

ticket, and later in the formation of a United Front Against Fascism coalition. In response to the former, spokesperson Bernandine Dohrn arrogantly suggested that SDS's revolutionary practice was above the reformist "vehicle of electoral politics," and that such an alliance based on "least common denominator politics" would benefit neither organization (quoted in Barber, 2006, p. 228). The white public profession of the BPP's right to political leadership thus did not translate to practice in any substantive sense when that leadership was exercised.

San Francisco Newsreel and the Black Panther Party collaborated on three newsreel documentaries, *Black Panther*, *Interview with Bobby Seale* (1969), and *May Day Panther* (1969), over the course of about a two-year period. Newsreel's partnership with the Panthers, in comparison with SDS, was of a far more considered and complex nature. In "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Marx infamously suggested of the small-holding peasantry that, during the upheavals of 1848 in France, their disaggregated class nature and geographical diffusion rendered them "incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (1978c, p. 608). This fraught question of representation can also be posed of the relationship between racialized groups like the Panthers and the white organizations who sought to publicize them. The economic conditions of the black lumpenproletariat precluded them from direct access to many contemporary forms of cultural expression, but their identification by the Party as the leading objective revolutionary force in American society offered a political mediation through which such expression might take place. The historically segregated means of film production, technical knowledge, and distribution, however, meant that before the mid-1970s, "radical Black films [...] throughout the country were made [almost entirely] by radical White filmmakers," which meant yet another level of mediation removing the film from the concrete life of the community (James, 1989, p. 181). This problem would have to be dealt with through firm structural mechanisms.

White Newsreel members shared the same admiration for the Party as their contemporaries, but the political dynamic governing their work together helped to maintain a more equitable working relationship and ensure a collaborative mode of representation. It is also probably not coincidental that San Francisco was uncommon within Newsreel in that the chapter was led in practice by two women, Marilyn Buck and

Karen Ross. The partnership, which crucially granted editorial authority over all political matters to BPP leadership, proved enormously influential on San Francisco and led them to turn “away from the counterculture and toward Marxist-Leninism” well before similar shakeups would occur in New York or the smaller chapters (James, 1989, p. 182). Such a working relationship, which actually embodied the recognition of black vanguardism supposedly avowed by SDS, would eventually become a point of contention with others in Newsreel who sought a more critical perspective on the groups and movements they examined. The disagreement reflected broader internal differences, going back to the organization’s origins, about Newsreel’s political role as an instrumental media apparatus in service of the New Left as a whole versus Newsreel as a distinct political agent with its own theoretical perspective and organizational goals (Nichols, 1980, pp. 32-33). It also reflected the degree to which vanguard politics, and the notion of hierarchical leadership were still controversial formulations among New Left activists.<sup>23</sup>

*Black Panther* does not entirely forgo the Third World romanticism embodied in some of the BPP’s visual and rhetorical self-construction. In fact, it even strategically weaponizes this romanticism to a certain extent. The film is like a mass media taxonomy of the Panthers as a (counter)public cultural articulation, indexing the strange amalgam of Black Power, revolutionary nationalism, and Maoism that made the Party a key transitional figure in the twin trajectories of black liberation and communist struggle in the United States. Look no further than the unofficial title, which can be heard mid-way through the film as a call-and-response chant sung by a group of black women and men: “No more brothers in jail.” “*Off the pig!*” “Pigs are gonna catch hell.” “*Off the pig!*” This antagonistic declaration, offset by a material demand—in this case, ending black incarceration—achieves a means of binding and articulating the lumpenized black subject as a participant within the struggle and life of the organization as it works to develop its political critique through practice, inviting the target audience to participate in this life as well. In much the same spirit as Young (2006) suggests of a later Newsreel

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<sup>23</sup> A third position between these opposing camps, analytical yet charged with partisan rage, can be found in the Chicago-based Film Group’s *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (Howard Alk & Mike Gray, 1971), which attempts the ideologically demanding balancing act of joining a considered investigation of the circumstances surrounding the Panther leader’s assassination with the propagandistic thrust of a call to action. By the time the film was released on to the festival circuit, however, the BPP was already beginning to fall into disarray, inadvertently resigning Alk and Gray’s immediate political use-value to journalistic analysis and historical witness.

work, *Teach Our Children* (Christine Choy & Susan Robeson, 1972), what emerges in *Black Panther* is an open-ended “depiction of a community of struggle defined by its opposition to oppression based on multiple identity categories—class, ethnicity, and national identity” (p. 146).

Of course, the sort of revolutionary optimism exemplified in the film was not borne out in actuality. Local police revanchism, coupled with the systematic harassment, infiltration, surveillance, disinformation, discrediting, assault, imprisonment, and outright assassination carried out by the FBI under the auspices of COINTELPRO and other counterintelligence activities contributed mightily to rank-and-file demoralization, ideological conflicts, and breakdowns in discipline that seriously curtailed the Party’s organizing capabilities. In 1969, a year after *Black Panther* was first released, 749 party members were arrested and 27 killed (Elbaum, 2002, p. 66), astonishing numbers for an organization that by Seale’s count peaked at only 5000 members nationwide (Johnson III, 1998, p. 410n.4). Two years later, a faction led by Cleaver, who by this time was living in exile in Algiers, unsuccessfully made a play for internal hegemony, advocating a turn to immediate armed struggle and urban warfare against the community organizing approach of Newton’s leadership. The latter’s limited practical competence as a political organizer, exacerbated by serious alcohol and cocaine addictions he developed in the years after his release from prison following a nearly three-year stint, convinced many national leaders and experienced cadres to side with Cleaver. Newton and Seale eventually managed to regain control of the organization, but not before dozens of leading cadres were purged, New York leadership was permanently alienated from Oakland, and at least two veteran Party members were executed—most likely by their erstwhile comrades.<sup>24</sup> By 1972, after the Cleaver-faction had successfully been expelled, “approximately thirty to forty percent of the BPP [had] left as a result of this internal conflict” and the remaining chapters had been (temporarily) recalled to Oakland to consolidate power at the municipal level through an ill-fated Seale mayoral election

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<sup>24</sup> Although COINTELPRO activities against the Panthers were widespread and took many forms, the FBI placed particular emphasis on the campaign to divide Party leadership, which utilized malicious and violent forms of disinformation and psychological manipulation. Newton recalled, for example, a period during which “[f]or three solid weeks a barrage of anonymous letters flowed from [what I only later discovered was] FBI Headquarters. The messages became more and more vicious” (quoted in Johnson III, 1998, p. 403).



**Figure 5 – Black Panthers performing drills. *Black Panther* (Robert Lacativa, Robert Machover, & Paul Shinoff, 1968). San Francisco Newsreel.**

campaign cooked up by Newton (Johnson III, 1998, p. 402).<sup>25</sup> The Black Panther Party would never really recover from the split and Seale's loss. It descended further into a mistrustful and self-destructive internal culture, and in 1974 Newton himself would go into exile after being indicted on murder and assault charges relating to the shooting of a

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<sup>25</sup> A significant portion of those cadres who left formed the Black Liberation Army, an urban guerilla organization active between c. 1970–1981 that followed the armed struggle line espoused by the Cleaver faction. This sort of political adventurism was practiced by numerous armed groups, most notably the Weather Underground Organization, but it rarely moved beyond a small number of underground members planning and carrying out isolated actions, proving incapable of instigating the mass armed rebellions it was meant to inspire.

sex worker and an unrelated assault (Johnson III, pp. 406-407).<sup>26</sup>

## 2.4. A Compartmentalized World

The large portion of the black working class, segregated in the dilapidated, redlined ghettos, did not correspond to the lurid, self-serving image of the lumpen as criminal or hustler, but as particular social formations many black communities could be considered lumpenized-in-general on the basis of their often overall precarious and informal economic circumstances. Historically, black labour in the U.S. has played a semi-permanent structural role of grounding the reserve army, helping to keep labour costs down as a major source of cheap or unwaged labour. This has translated, since the failure of Reconstruction, to consistent, disproportionately high rates of black unemployment, lower rates of pay, and higher rates of workplace injury and death for black workers.<sup>27</sup> Crime and other similar elements of the informal economy have only supplemented these more basic economic realities, although they have inevitably been the most highlighted, by open white supremacists and more subtly racist liberals, as well as by leading elements in the Black Panthers and other black militant organizations. Against the fetishization of the criminal lumpen, it is the entire cross-section of the BPP's social base Elaine Brown refers to when she attempts to square the Panther's vision with that of the traditional Marxist movement:

The black lumpen proletariat, unlike Marx's working class, had absolutely no stake in industrial America. They existed at the bottom level of society in America, outside the capitalist system that was the basis for the oppression of black people. They were the millions of black domestics and porters, nurses' aides and maintenance men, laundresses and cooks, sharecroppers, unpropertied ghetto dwellers, welfare mother, and street hustlers. At their lowest level, at the core, they were, the gang members

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<sup>26</sup> Elaine Brown took over leadership during Newton's exile and directed the Party toward rectifying the more toxic elements of its internal culture that had flourished under Newton's personality cult. He eventually returned to the United States in 1977 and was acquitted on all charges. Nevertheless, Newton's leadership between 1971 and 1974 was marked by substance abuse, violence, extortion, intimidation, and even embezzlement of Party funds. See Johnson, III (1998, pp. 406-409).

<sup>27</sup> Of course, these forms of exploitation and degradation corresponding more or less to the "normal" (white or deracinated) function of capitalism must be understood in conjunction with the various forms of unwaged or bonded labour more unique to the black experience in the U.S., such as chattel slavery, sharecropping, debt peonage, and prison labour.



and the gangsters, the pimps and the prostitutes, the drug users and dealers, the common thieves and murderers. (Quoted in Hansen, 2015)

But for many others in the organization, particularly younger men, it was the masculine figure of the armed militant that embodied the power and hope for black liberation. The Party's inconsistency in developing substantive discipline within its ranks meant that erratic and criminal behaviours often were not curbed for the sake of the collective, and in some cases were even tacitly encouraged. For instance, members who engaged in theft were asked to donate stolen weapons and other resources to the Party (Booker, 1998, p. 341). Seale very pointedly summarized the BPP's lumpen strategy, with all the potentialities and hazards it promised, explaining,

Huey wanted brothers off the block—brothers who had been other there robbing banks, [...] pimping, [...] peddling dope, [...] fighting pigs—because he knew that once they get themselves together in the area of political education [...] you get revolutionaries who are too much. (Quoted in Booker, 1998, p. 346)

Although ideological investment in a progressive leader should not be equated, as the familiar anti-communist boogeyman of totalitarianism suggests, with the fascist lionization of the leader who embodies the political will and life of the *Volk*, the materialist kernel buried within this liberal notion is the very real fragility of mass politics where there are not appropriate structures in place to facilitate and encourage ongoing mass democratic engagement. For better and for worse, the iconic figures of the Party's leadership provided key points of condensation for the ideological and affective binding of this mass democracy and the Third World counterpublic envisaged by Young (2006). In *Black Panther*, the assertive visual and auditory presence of Newton is especially important for engaging the audience and legitimating the Panthers' vanguardist claims and leading role in the black liberation movement. Prior to the Cleaver split, the Minister of Defense, even more than Seale, "held the actual reins of power within the BPP," which took on an even more potent symbolic dimension after his imprisonment on murder charges following a Panther shootout with police that resulted in the death of an Oakland police officer in 1967 (Elbaum, 2006, p. 66). The first time Newton appears on-screen he is in close-up, addressing the camera. Because of the relatively tight framing on Newton's face, the setting is not particularly clear until, mid-speech, the camera slowly pans to the right to expose the comings-and-goings of a guard office visible through a window. The revealed prison location formally reinforces Newton's alignment

with the criminalized and lumpenized “brothers on the block,” while simultaneously evoking the enormous “Free Huey!” popular front campaign led by the Panthers to exonerate him. (The ubiquity of the campaign and the visibility of the Panthers make it practically unthinkable that any contemporary viewers would have been unfamiliar with Newton’s legal situation, and the filmmakers employ footage from a rally later on in the film.) Newton’s active participation suggested that even this sort of intense state repression could not stem nor silence the rising tide of revolutionary black militancy. Indeed, appearing in the film was one of the few ways that Newton could contribute to the Panthers’ nascent party-building efforts. Because he remained in prison until 1970 after his voluntary manslaughter conviction was overturned and he was granted a new trial, the political position into which he was thrust upon release was one Newton had little practical experience or capacity for. The Black Panther Party had already reached its zenith, and he was more icon than organizer. To his ultimate detriment and the Party’s, “Newton achieved mythic status among many Black and radical activists as a political prisoner,” not as an active leader (Johnson III, 1998, p. 399). But it was in no small part precisely that mythic status that helped to bolster the nationwide growth of the Party’s membership. “In sum,” Young suggests, “*Black Panther* stands as an ideal recruitment film, long on black-jacketed paraders and radical icons, but short on critical analysis. The iconic status of Seale and particularly Newton is reinforced, but only at the representational sacrifice of everyday Panther members” (2006, p. 123).

The Black Panthers have often been criticized for the masculine, paramilitary style with which they carried themselves: the leather, the afros, the inflammatory language, the centralism, the vanguardist orientation, and, most importantly, the guns. It was a visual and rhetorical language around which the black ghetto community could orient themselves, politicizing blackness and providing a conceptual and affective basis for the interconnected development of revolutionary class and national consciousnesses. So while the BPP undeniably had significant problems with chauvinist and sexist attitudes and leadership structures, particularly during the 1960s before women cadres began stepping into more leadership positions, the masculinized iconicity of physical and symbolic revolutionary violence they strategically adopted was a direct response to the concrete conditions of Oakland and the other urban ghettos where Panthers organized amongst the working class and lumpenproletarian base. They were, after all, founded as the Black Panther Party *for Self-Defense*. But the defense of poor and dispossessed



Figure 6 – Political geography of Oakland. *Black Panther* (Robert Lacativa, Robert Machover, & Paul Shinoff, 1968). San Francisco Newsreel.

black communities depended, as *Black Panther* (unfortunately) only passingly demonstrates, equally on “survival” or “serve the people” programs of community self-reliance like free breakfast, medical, and educational programs, as it did on armed self-defense against the omnipresent brutality and anti-blackness of the police, whom the Panthers identified as domestic colonial occupiers akin to the U.S. military in Vietnam. Both of these components of the BPP’s work, one feminized and the other deeply masculine, should be understood as complementary elements in the circuit of social reproduction constituting and maintaining black life in the ghetto. This is of course a non-bourgeois practice of social reproduction, a collective effort of the black community unifying to ensure its collective survival in lieu of the more familiar cycle of production-reproduction tied to the (abstract, white) proletariat’s capacity for social reproduction through the wage (C-M-C; labour power-money-labour power).<sup>28</sup>

The film’s concluding and most significant sequence, tellingly, does not focus on any human subjects, but rather foregrounds the urban geography of occupied black Oakland. Filmed from the passenger-side window of a moving car, bringing to mind the armed community patrols that would shadow cops as they made their way through black neighbourhoods, a series of tracking shots scour the dilapidated infrastructure and side streets of the ghetto, seemingly evacuated of all human life. In voiceover, Chairman Bobby Seale reads aloud the first section (“What We Want Now!”) from the Party’s Ten-Point Program, laying out the immediate demands of the black liberation movement, and aurally fixing the theoretical and political heart of the BPP’s project to the concrete space from which it emerged.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This treatment of social reproduction sidesteps to an extent the crucial problem of women’s unwaged labour in the maintenance and reproduction of the masculine worker’s labour power. I do not wish to diminish the importance of gender for social reproduction theory, but merely to demonstrate how the lumpen and precariously proletarian class character of the BPP’s social base often left it without access to wage-labour, not to mention adequate state welfare, as a key link in the production-reproduction sequence. Alberto Toscano (2016) has provocatively theorized these sorts of practices which collectively “appropriate politically aspects of social reproduction that state and capital have abandoned or rendered unbearably exclusionary” as historically emergent cases of “dual biopower,” extending and reinterpreting the classical Leninist concept of dual power (p. 228).

<sup>29</sup> The Ten-Point Program document as quoted by Seale is superficially altered from the original text. The program was first published in the 15 May 1967 issue of the *Black Panther* newspaper and can be found in its original wording at <<https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/25139/the-black-panther-partys-ten-point-program/>>.

Let's get into the inner workings and the meaning of this. Let's get into the inner workings and the meaning of a black revolution and why Black people have a right to take what's theirs. You can read the platform in the program. And it's a basic program. And it simply says what Black people have been crying for for four-hundred years. One. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black communities. Two. We want full employment for our people. Three. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings. Four. We want an end to the robbery of the Black community by the White racist business man. Five. We want decent education that teaches us about the true nature of this racist, decadent system, and education that teaches us about our true history and our role in society and in the world today. Six. We want all Black brothers to be exempt from military service. Seven. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people. Eight. We want all Black brothers and sisters held in federal, county, state, city prisons and jails to be released because they have not had a fair trial. They've been tried... they've been tried by all-white juries who have no understanding of the average reasoning of a man in the Black community. Number nine. This is where brother Huey is being caught. We just want the courts to make sure we have peers on the jury or people from the Black community as defined by their jive constitution of the so-called United States. Ten. The summary with the major political objective. That is, we want land, we want bread, we want housing, we want clothing, we want education, we want justice, and we want peace. And major political objective, we want a Black plebiscite in the UN where the Black colonial subjects will participate in dealing with, in analyzing, projecting politically upon the racist atrocities that have been committed against the Black people in this nation.

At the conclusion of Seale's speech, the camera finally stops on the Alameda County Courthouse, symbolically the stronghold of state power and the towering embodiment of all the pigs who have beaten, robbed, kidnapped, terrorized and murdered the black community of Oakland and beyond. It is the reason Huey Newton is locked up. It is the reason Lil' Bobby Hutton, the first martyred Panther, was shot by police twelve times after he had surrendered and stripped down to his underwear. It is a figuration of Frantz Fanon's (2004) identification of the Manichaeian spatial dialectic of the colony, found by the Panthers and their allies to be applicable to the American ghetto: the spatial disjuncture between the colonizer and colonized is the mark of a "compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, [...] inhabited by two species," one white and the other black (p. 5).

## 2.5. Conclusion

An oft-told, possibly apocryphal, probably exaggerated story about a 1969 college screening of *Columbia Revolt* in Buffalo has it that the film inspired five hundred audience members to destroy the school's Reserve Officer Training Core building, smashing the office before lighting it on fire (cited in Gaines, 1999; Nichols, 1972; Renov, 1987; Young, 2006). As heartening as reports of this incident may be, it is anomalous. Jane M. Gaines (1999) cites it as the "one example of *spontaneous* audience activism on record" (p. 89; emphasis added). Drawing on secondhand testimony by Buck and Ross, Young (2006) also finds evidence of a minor incident that took place in 1968 or 1969: "When *Columbia Revolt* was screened at the University of California at Santa Cruz the day before a protest against the Board of Regents, *it helped strengthen their resolve*" (p. 117; emphasis added). What constitutes a strengthening of the protestors' collective resolve is not elaborated on; presumably, many such screenings strengthened the resolve of protestors already committed to particular actions. By comparison, the achievement of making the BPP's Ten-Point Program widely and aesthetically accessible and compelling via audio-visual communication, making of it a consciousness-raising apparatus, should be seen as an implicit rebuke of the students' political spontaneism in favour of revolutionary organization and discipline, while nevertheless still offering a productive example of how the affective-mimetic charge identified by Gaines can be placed in the service of theoretical and practical mass education.

Unlike the mechanical materialist rendering of the particular-universal relation in *Columbia Revolt*, the "contrapuntal interaction between word and image" (Nichols, 1978, p. 26) evoking the dialectical unity of program and geography during the conclusion of *Black Panther* provides a bold example in action of Lenin's (1947) dictum about the necessity of political strategy grounded in the "concrete analysis of a concrete situation" (p. 166). The essentially Manichaeian spatial logic of the American ghetto, and the emptiness with which it is depicted during the finale, visually suggests the material absence at the core of the internally colonized, black lumpenproletariat, disconnected from any basis for employment or continuing social reproduction, at the same time as Seale's voice insists on the community's right to those materials necessary for continuing black social life, and on the imminent possibility of radical social

transformation. In a divergent but complementary register, San Francisco Newsreel members Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross imagine an even broader cross-class role for *Black Panther*, saying of the film in 1969:

The film on the Black Panther Party turns people's heads around, aweing them with the strength and the nature of the Panthers of which they may not have previously conceived. We think the film is politically and visually exciting—it demands that people react to it, and not pass it off. It is a film that evokes response with the most diverse kinds of audiences—liberals on their way to the film festival, students at the universities, the black communities in the streets. (Fruchter, Buck, Ross, & Kramer, 2016, p. 554)

While *Black Panther* was clearly only a single element in a complex cultural and media program for the BPP's primary communities, Buck's and Ross's perhaps overly optimistic invocation of middle class students and film festival liberals speaks to the Party's penetration into more mainstream discourse and the partial integration of the progressive petit bourgeoisie both domestically and internationally into the growing counterpublic buzzing around the Party's social nuclei in Oakland, Harlem, Watts, and similar black city ghettos.<sup>30</sup> Such was the emerging situation, according to historians Aaron J. Leonard and Conor J. Gallagher (2014), in which “the *idea* of the Panthers—disciplined organization, the notion of a larger revolutionary unity, and a willingness to be theoretical—was far more powerful than the *actual ideas* of the Panthers” (p. 27; emphasis in original).

At the end of the 1960s, the white New Left was struggling through the problem of conceptualizing political agency and subjectivity apart from the figure of the proletariat, even as the racialized New Left was beginning to conceptualize its national oppression as a necessary feature of the capitalist-imperialist world-system. The cautiously Marxist-Leninist politics of national self-determination imagined by the Black Panthers could therefore only be articulated in terms that centred the class experiences of the most marginalized members of the black community and, in doing so, excluded

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<sup>30</sup> By comparison, Film Group directors Mike Gray and Howard Auk were openly disdainful of *The Murder of Fred Hampton's* reception in Chicago, saying in an October 1971 interview, “If Fred Hampton had spoken Greek [...] the movie would still be running. People like to feel righteous. But they like to feel righteous about other people. [...] Some people in Chicago don't want to draw that conclusion [that Hampton was murdered by the state] because then they'd have to share responsibility for doing something about it” (Ebert, 1971, n.p.). It seems textual identification and counterpublic participation only go so far before the hard questions of political commitment rear their ugly heads.

the comprador black bourgeoisie from their vision of the black nation. So if the primary political role of the Newsreel organization was to play the mass media propagandist for SDS and the various racialized groups that encircled this student movement behemoth, it also became a semi-public chronicler of the New Left's frustration with the received wisdom about class power and the materiality of race, and of their struggles to reorient the movement along more recognizably socialist lines. This problematic was already coming to a head when, in June 1969, the 100,000 strong SDS split irreconcilably over the political character of oppressed peoples' nationalisms and the direction of the anti-imperialist movement. The split proved to be a definitive end to the New Left period as it had progressed over the course of the decade; but also the beginning of a new era in the American Left, smaller, more disciplined, and if anything more radical than its predecessor. Newsreel and the broader revolutionary filmmaking milieu would not fully make the transition into the New Communist Movement, but the work they did produce during their slow demise over the new few years is instructive about the mass character of documentary film and its potential and paradoxical role(s) in the cultural work of cadre organizations.



## Chapter 3.

### **“A Component Part of the General Struggle of All the People of the World”: Black Detroit and *Finally Got the News***

*Then came the black slaves. Day after day the clank of chained feet marching from Virginia and Carolina to Georgia was heard in these rich swamp lands. Day after day the songs of the callous, the wail of the motherless, and the muttered curses of the wretched echoed from the Flint to the Chickasawhatchee, until by 1860 there had risen in West Dougherty perhaps the richest slave kingdom the modern world ever knew. A hundred and fifty barons commanded the labor of nearly six thousand Negroes, held sway over farms with ninety thousand acres of tilled land, valued even in times of cheap soil at three millions of dollars. Twenty thousand bales of ginned cotton went yearly to England, New and Old; and men that came there bankrupt made money and grew rich. In a single decade the cotton output increased fourfold and the value of lands was tripled. It was the heyday of the nouveau riche, and a life of careless extravagance reigned among the masters.*

— W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1904)

*“UAW” means “You ain’t white!”*

— *League of Revolutionary Black Workers, protest chant* (1970)

On July 23, 1967, a violent police raid on an after-hours black bar incited what is now known as the Detroit Rebellion, the largest of the more than 150 riots and urban insurrections that swept the United States during the Long Hot Summer of 1967. Following the April 4, 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., a second riot shook Detroit, accompanied by riots in over 100 other cities. King’s murder and the outpouring of grief and anger that it aroused inspired responses from communist and anti-colonial organizations around the world. Of particular significance was Mao Zedong’s statement on behalf of the Communist Party of China, published in a widely distributed edition of the English-language news magazine *Peking Review*, in which he reaffirmed China’s

longstanding solidarity with the black struggle against racial oppression in the United States and declared common cause between their respective movements. “The struggle of the Black people in the United States for emancipation is a component part of the general struggle of all the people of the world against U.S. imperialism,” Mao asserted, “[it is] a component of the contemporary world revolution” (1968, p. 6).

On May 2, workers at Chrysler’s Dodge Main automotive plant in Hamtramck, Michigan walked off the job without union authorization. It was one of the first major actions in a renewed cycle of class struggle that had laid mostly dormant in the auto industry, and in the majority of industrial labour sectors,<sup>31</sup> since the 1947 passage of the Taft-Hartley Act and the anti-communist purges of the CIO unions.<sup>32</sup> Despite white instigation and multi-racial participation in the strike, Chrysler’s counterattack specifically targeted black workers for disciplinary action and dismissal. This racialized divide-and-conquer tactic had long been a standard (and successful) practice in the industry, and was tolerated and even encouraged by a reactionary United Automobile Workers (UAW) bureaucracy under long-time leader Walter P. Reuther. This time, however, the collective frustration and desire that drove the workers to circumvent the UAW labour aristocrats in the first place was organized and emboldened to autonomously push for the fired workers’ reinstatements. Black workers’ caucuses at Dodge Main that had been self-organizing since the experience of the Rebellion prepared the way for the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), which successfully called for a second wildcat strike in July. More revolutionary union movements (RUMs) sprouted up at plants around Metropolitan Detroit. In early 1969 the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a

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<sup>31</sup> For a wide-ranging survey of worker-led struggles during the late 1960s and 1970s, see A. Brenner, R. Brenner, and Winslow (Eds.), *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s* (2010).

<sup>32</sup> The larger American Federation of Labor (AFL) more or less broken with its socialist roots during the interwar period. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), founded during the Great Depression to organize in those industrial (often unskilled) sectors left ignored by the AFL, originally featured a significant Communist and socialist presence. Although many of these organizers existed precariously within their respective unions, they also spearheaded a great deal of the CIO’s political work prior to the War. The AFL and CIO merged in 1955. For a history of the CPUSA’s role in the CIO, see Klehr and Haynes (1994), and with a focus on the organization of black Southern workers, Kelley (2015, pp. 138-151).

vanguard organization uniting the RUMs that explicitly identified itself as both *black* and *Marxist-Leninist*, was formally established (Geschwender, 1977, pp. 84-5).<sup>33</sup>

This political designation was always in flux, however. Unlike the Black Panther Party, the black organization that enjoyed the most prestige amongst U.S. revolutionaries at the end of the 1960s, the League's primary source of mass support was among formally employed, black industrial workers. This lent greater credence to their identification with Marxism-Leninism than some of their more ideologically and compositionally heterogeneous contemporaries. But political differences within the League, both internal to the Executive and between the layers of the leadership, cadres/organic intellectuals, and rank-and-file members—pulling the organization between cultural nationalist, proletarian nationalist, and workerist politics—never allowed it to coalesce into the disciplined, democratic centralist organization envisioned by its founders. A significant component of the struggle waged by the most publically visible leaders to hegemonically unite the League under this Marxist-Leninist banner was the production of an hour-long, Newsreel-affiliated documentary entitled *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). This “teaching” film, which was intended for distribution internally, domestically, and internationally, provided the Leninist leadership faction and cadre elements with a platform from which to analyze and frame the conjunctural problems facing black industrial workers in Detroit and elsewhere, as well as explain the League's practice and structure. *Finally Got the News* focuses in particular on the conjunctural, racialized mode of intensified exploitation sarcastically referred to by contemporary black auto workers as “*niggermation*.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> League spokesperson John Watson suggests that from even before the establishment of DRUM, the goal of organizers was to “build an organization of black workers, of black students, both in high schools and colleges, and ultimately to create a black Marxist-Leninist Party” (1968, p. 31).

<sup>34</sup> A note first about the term “niggermation.” The word is affectively and ideologically charged. It is colloquial play on automation, particular to the culture of mid-century black auto workers around Detroit, and refers, according to Adamson (2012), specifically to “the intensive acceleration of productive outputs that resulted from compulsory overtime and speedups on the line” in response to the prolonged crisis of Fordist capital accumulation; especially in those less skilled, more dangerous branches of the plant overwhelmingly staffed by blacks (p. 813). Put simply, it is the condition “in which one black man does the job previously done by three white men” (Watson, 1968, p. 37). The term appears in a great deal of scholarship on the League, appearing for instance in Adamson (2012), Cohen (2008), Desan (2014), Marable (1982), and Moody (2010). Georgakas and Surkin (1998) go so far as to devote an entire chapter in their book to the phenomenon and its effects. Some of these authors are black, some otherwise racialized, others still white. Clearly, there can be no untroubled invocation of the term, scholarly or otherwise, but I will venture that the



**Figure 7 – DRUM candidates for UAW office. *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Icarus Films.**

Although this topic constituted a major object of analysis in itself, I argue that instrumentally it also represented a formal device for contesting and hegemonically defining the very nature of race as a system of historical phenomena; for the League members involved in the documentary's production, the ability to define the parameters of the racial question was paramount, as the struggle over race was at the same time the struggle over the right to establish and lead a vanguard program of mass struggle adequate to the problematic of racial capitalism. This complex intervention was not to

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historical specificity of this racialized experience of exploitation and alienation, its particularity as a worker-created concept, and the severity and material link to the capitalist history of slavery it implies, do together warrant, if not necessarily justify, its deployment.

pan out, however, as the concrete steps necessary to produce the film themselves contributed to the formal dissolution of the League as a coherent political organization.

### 3.1. White Newsreel, Black League

In all, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers operated as an effective vehicle for black communist struggles in Detroit for only a few short years—from the formation of the first RUM in Hamtramck through the 1971 founding of the national Black Workers Congress (BWC) and the associated leadership split over League strategy and ideology that would signal the League’s functional demise. Nevertheless, during this short period it became widely recognized around the U.S. and internationally as a successful model for revolutionary black organizing at the point of production. In addition to the League’s origins in shop-floor struggle, it carried out an ambitious local media program, which represented a significant portion of its work and resources. Not only did the League publish and distribute *Inner City Voice*, a popular community newspaper founded in 1967 by many of the same militants who would go on to lead the first wildcat strikes, but during the 1968-69 academic year it also exerted editorial control over Wayne State University’s student paper the *South End*, essentially transforming it into a state-financed DRUM political organ.<sup>35</sup> These newspapers, along with countless leaflets, bulletins, and newsletters produced by the League and the various local RUMs, formed a far-reaching and sophisticated media platform through which the organization could publicize its activities and speak concretely to the working class communities it served.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Under DRUM control, the *South End*’s masthead featured the Detroit skyline flanked by a pair of black panthers and the accompanying epigraph, “One class-conscious worker is worth 100 students.”

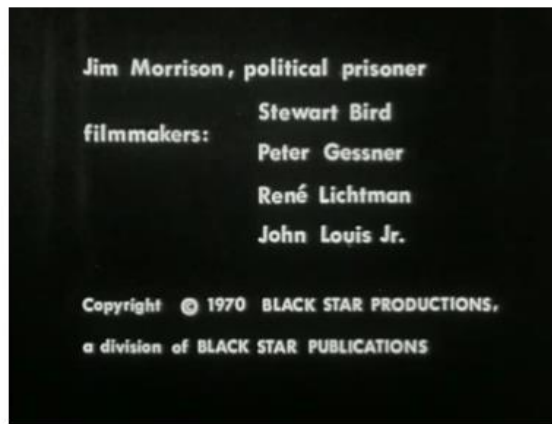
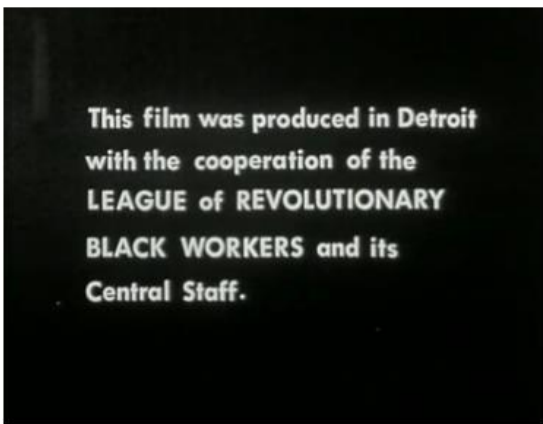
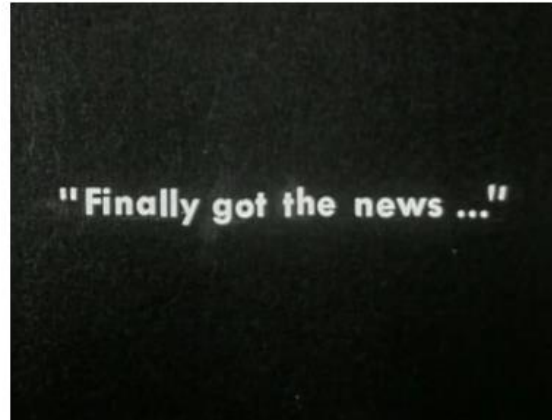
<sup>36</sup> It is one of the ironies of academic archivization that the vast majority of the public record on the League is now held by the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Reuther served as president of the UAW from 1946 until his death in 1970, and—as much as any figure in American labour history—was instrumental in the anti-communist declawing and bureaucratization of the union movement from World War II onward. It was also the paternalistic policy of racial liberalism, of which he was a leading proponent within the AFL-CIO, that helped to legitimize the workplace subordination of black workers and the ghettoization of black social life under the guise of technical union integrationism. On racial liberalism in the UAW, see Camp (2016, pp. 47-50). Luckily, a small but not insignificant collection of League materials exists in digital form through the Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line.

*Finally Got the News*, by comparison, was initially the brainchild of white filmmakers from the New York branch of Newsreel. In June 1969, a small detachment headed up by Newsreel member Jim Morrison travelled to Detroit to conduct interviews and consult with the League about producing a film for distribution among the usual, mostly white, crowd of New Left anti-war and student groups that made up the core of their audience. Although at this early stage Morrison was the Newsreel member most vocal about the project, he would unfortunately not be around to see the documentary made. When funding was not initially approved by the New York membership, despite interest in the materials Morrison and the others had collected, the “exasperated Morrison,” Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin (1998) recount, took “fund-raising into his own hands by undertaking an ill-fated hashish-smuggling scheme that netted him a ten-year prison sentence” in Canada (p. 113).<sup>37</sup> Funds were eventually made available, but the crew assigned to Detroit was less than favourably received by League membership. The politics and image that the League projected, which was of a radical labour organization composed of regular blue collar workers and their allies, was noticeably removed from the militarized, lumpen, “urban guerilla” line advocated by most members of Newsreel. The political organizing done by the Newsreel contingent caused friction with locals, as they aggressively agitated within other groups and openly contested the League’s political line, promoting instead the Black Panther Party and Weathermen as organizational models for black and white militants, respectively (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, pp. 113-114, 119).<sup>38</sup> This hard-headed strategy likely stemmed from the ideological struggles over power imbalances between members then taking place within New York Newsreel. In response to these early internal criticisms of Newsreel’s practice, an organizational mandate arose emphasizing the need to balance filmmaking with active organizing, “where members would work with a particular constituency, provide political leadership *and also* make films” (Nichols, 1973, p. 9; emphasis added). All of this, of course, was viewed with deep suspicion by some League activists and workers.

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<sup>37</sup> According to Georgakas and Surkin, Morrison escaped from a prison farm three years into his sentence and as of 1974 was considered a wanted fugitive, location unknown. No scholarship on the League or Newsreel seems to pick up Morrison’s trail after this point. Like so many activists and cadres forced by the state to go underground during this period, Morrison’s disappearance denotes a potentially irretrievable gap in the history of the Left.

<sup>38</sup> Ironically, one of the primary reasons that funding was initially turned down by the New York collective was fear of falling into or being perceived as falling into white adventurism, which some members saw as a danger already taking shape in San Francisco Newsreel’s relationship with the Oakland Black Panthers (Robé, 2017, p. 47).



**Figure 8 – Opening credits. *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Icarus Films.**

To many in Detroit's black communities, the Newsreel representatives were nothing but white interlopers overstepping their boundaries; "radical forces within the city [...] became increasingly annoyed that a small outside group with no local base and no local work continued to advocate and work on projects contrary to the wishes and safety of local activists" (Georgakas, 1984, p. 162).

In the end, very few members of Newsreel were permitted to stay in Detroit for the duration of *Finally Got the News*' production period. In contrast to their colleagues' patronizing political entryism, the film's three white co-directors, Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, and René Lichtman, remained focused on the film and committed themselves to accurately portraying the theory and practice of the League itself, which meant

concentrating in particular on shop-floor exploitation and violence, struggles within and against the UAW bureaucracy, and the historical role of the black worker as a super-exploitable source of labour-power. Next to Bird, Gessner, Lichtman, John Lewis, Jr., and “Jim Morrison, political prisoner” in the opening credits, the film prominently lists the participation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as producers.<sup>39</sup> According to Georgakas (1973), *Finally Got the News* has the distinction of being the only film of its era “made under the direct control of revolutionary working class blacks *with the specific purpose of radicalizing other black workers,*” which was the League’s precondition for participation in the project (p. 2; emphasis added). Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman dealt primarily with a specific segment of the League’s central staff in crafting the educational tone and gaining access to resources, shooting locations, and on-screen subjects. Meanwhile, the project was regarded with mistrust and in some cases outright hostility by other League elements. “A majority of the leadership believed in a low public profile,” explain Georgakas and Surkin,

Many of them did not want any filmmakers, much less white filmmakers, covering meetings, demonstrations, and factory agitation. They thought workers who were moving toward them might be frightened off. They also feared that the film would ultimately be useful to the companies, police, and union for gathering intelligence about League activities. (1998, p. 114)

Amongst the seven-member Executive Committee, original DRUM organizers Mike Hamlin and John Watson (the latter having served as editor of the *Inner City Voice* and *South End*), along with attorney Ken Cockrel, represented the wing of the League pushing to branch out from exclusively union- and plant-based struggles towards an encompassing approach that would educate and organize the black working class inside *and* outside of the workplace. They saw the necessary, long-term revolutionary political strategy of building dual power—the development of revolutionary social institutions that could eventually replace state institutions—as one that could only be accomplished by establishing workers’ control over those institutions and apparatuses governing black life in the social, cultural, and legal spheres, *as well* as at the point of production. This program would also require alliances with other peoples of colour and progressive white

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<sup>39</sup> Lewis was a young member of the League who was recruited to the production team as the first participant in a poorly planned attempt to train local black workers in filmmaking. The process was haphazard, although later in the production process a handful of League members were capably contributing as camera operators. According to the Newsreel representatives their ostensible “co-director” Lewis was rarely around during filming (Robé, 2017, p. 50).



workers. Ultimately it would mean eventually building a black, and finally a multi-racial Marxist-Leninist party, even if such organizations were not on the immediate horizon. The place of the film within this “multilevel strategy for revolution,” then, was to establish conceptual and representational links between these “distinct social levels” in Detroit and between the League as a “unique local model and experience” for anti-racist and anti-capitalist revolutionaries elsewhere (Jameson, 1991, p. 413-414). *Finally Got the News* was different from the League’s other media-based initiatives. Even more so than with the *South End* venture, the political takeover of which had been a major boon to the RUMs in building the local movement as well as alliances with anti-imperialist movements internationally, the film represented a concerted attempt to link up black workers’ struggles in Detroit with others around the United States and abroad.<sup>40</sup>

Watson took the lead on the film project in coordination with Newsreel, and thus it is the Cockrel-Hamlin-Watson faction’s evolving anti-revisionist communist (or “Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought”) tendency that forms the theoretical basis of the film. This is not to say, however, that all competing elements in the League were anti-communist or anti-Marxist. The more cautious strategy pushed by Executive Committee members General Baker and Chuck Wooten to remain focused on the plants so as to consolidate the RUMs as a mass base, for instance, was clearly grounded in the U.S. communist movement’s traditional reliance on shop floor organizing.<sup>41</sup> Between these two sides, the remaining Executive members Luke Tripp and John Williams maintained a

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<sup>40</sup> Watson’s editorship of the *South End* faced intense criticism from local conservative groups and Wayne State donors, particularly for the newspaper’s consistent anti-Zionism and support for Al Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization. Abroad, the League garnered its most significant base of interest and support in Italy, which throughout the 1960s and 1970s experienced a protracted wave of extraparliamentary class struggle to the left of the reformist and collaborationist Italian Community Party (PCI). In late 1968, Watson spoke at an anti-imperialist conference in Naples, followed by a short tour of Italy’s major industrial centres, where he built connections with various activists and mass organizations (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, pp. 60-62). He would return in 1970 to make good on some of these contacts, selling prints of *Finally Got the News* to various extraparliamentary groups, PCI working groups, and even an Italian television station (pp. 144-145).

<sup>41</sup> The League’s organizational vitality was directly tied to the strength of the different RUMs. Chrysler’s Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) was, after DRUM, the largest and most militant RUM in Detroit, while the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) maintained a dynamic presence but was not quite as large. Other, smaller or less active RUMs in the auto industry included CADRUM, JARUM, MARUM, MERUM, and DRUM II. Outside of the industry were also UPRUM, representing United Postal Service workers; HRUM, representing health care workers; and NEWRUM, representing *Detroit News* workers (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, pp. 69-71).

“middle position” and held that the prevailing low level of political consciousness necessitated systematic “political education [...] served by a more intense contact with individual workers”—only after which would expanded League operations be feasible (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 75).<sup>42</sup> It is this middle position that points most directly to the primary contradiction facing League organizers: a great portion of the rank-and-file membership was still deeply influenced by various black cultural nationalist tendencies and saw no reason or basis for class-solidarity with whites. The breadth of political positions, and particularly the distance between rank-and-file nationalists and the Marxist leaders and cadre organizers, made the long-term stability of the League a trying prospect. As Hamlin candidly admits in a 1973 interview,

Word of what was happening in Detroit got to workers in other cities. They began to wage similar struggles and they began to communicate with us. We started to discuss ideas about coalitions, affiliations, national caucuses, black workers organizations and so forth. *We did not have the foundation to deal with this seriously because we had no trained cadre.* For instance, *we paid lip service to democratic centralism but it never operated.* We had no meaningful political education program. We tried it a number of times but it was sabotaged by the attitude of reactionary nationalists. They didn't want to study Marxism so they used various tactics to stop the classes. That is not to say that some of our instructors and classes were not dull for workers, but that's another question. *The nationalists would say that Marx and Lenin were white and not relevant.* (Quoted in Georgakas & Surkin, 1973; emphasis added)

*Finally Got the News*, as a theoretical and cultural intervention emerging from a specific tendency within the spectrum of the League's political composition, should therefore be understood as a significant articulation of the Marxist-Leninist position in the ongoing hegemonic struggle within the organization locally and the black liberation movement nationally over the essential character of race. As envisaged by Watson, the film's primary viewer was the black rank-and-file worker. Politicized white audiences were still important, but counted as a secondary consideration. Consequently, the theoretical vocabularies of anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism employed by the documentary's

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<sup>42</sup> James Forman, who joined the League's central staff after its founding in 1969, wielded great influence comparable with the executives. Originally, Forman's move to Detroit was seen as a coup for the League, because he brought with him great prestige and experience from his previous role in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. He was quite ambitious, and actively encouraged Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson to prematurely expand the League's operations. For this reason, he was regarded as a “wrecker and splitter” by members with more modest and local concerns (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 133).



**Figure 9 – John Watson. *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). In association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Icarus Films.**

various speakers and articulated visually by the filmmakers serve the dual purposes of both critiquing American capitalism and demonstrating the political insufficiency of cultural nationalism. In Gramscian terms, this understanding of black national uniformity or collectivity that superseded class difference represented an ideological form of “common sense” within the movement, a “traditional popular conception of the world”—albeit one that itself had subaltern characteristics—that had to be broken, so as to strengthen the League’s communist position both among its membership and its potential allies (Gramsci, 1971, p. 199). While the disagreement over strategy between the externally-oriented (Cockrel-Hamlin-Watson) and internally-oriented (Baker-Wooten) Marxists should not be downplayed—and indeed would come to be decisive in the League’s ultimate fate—it is this more theoretical conflict between *proletarian* anti-racism

and *multi-class* anti-racism that formed the field of social relations into which the film producers sought to intervene.

### **3.2. Montage: From the Fields to the Factory to the Streets**

At the core of Watson's materialist theorization of race and racialization is the historical institution of black labour's super-exploitation, in particular the relative continuity between chattel slavery and proletarianized black wage-labour. This model is firmly established from the outset in the film's most distinctive and atypical passage, a dizzying, multi-part montage history that wordlessly moves through the slave trade, the exploitation of chattel slave labour, the transition to post-bellum forms of peonage, the parallel emergence of the majority white labour and women's movements, and finally the postwar eruption of black rebellion against this prolonged reality of social exclusion. While Watson as the League's representative had final say about all political content, this sequence, certainly the most aesthetically expressive in the film, was largely conceived by Bird as an introductory formal device for drawing in viewers and historicizing the main body of the film (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 115). The contrapuntal urgency of the editing and score rhythms deepen the affective character of the archival images, while simultaneously connoting an analytical dimension that afterward continues on in a different register in the use of interviews, participant narration, and local music. Although the formal codes of realism dominate most of the film that follows, the dialectical reflexivity of this montage frames everything that comes after it.

The first images are a combination of early photographs and ink sketches of masters and slaves, punctuated by period documents advertising the sale of black flesh. Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman slowly cycle through the images, scoring them with a percussive, marching beat that gradually begins to increase in tempo, a tempo which in turn hurries along the pace of the editing. The pace of the montage reaches a fever pitch—and a modal shot length of under a second—with the turn-of-the-century outbreak of industrial working class militancy, which the directors articulate visually through rapid zooms and pans across photos, images spinning and bouncing around the screen. One of the sequence's most memorable shots depicts a still image of a handshake between

two men. Implied to be an owner and union rep, the handshake jumps up and down across the screen's vertical axis, slyly simulating their gesture of collaboration, of labour's selling out. Again, the analytical potential of editing and movement serves to set up thematics that will be dealt with in more detail later on: in this case, the racism and class collaborationism of mainstream labour.

And with the briefest of pauses, like the rest in a musical piece, the montage leaves collaborationist unionism behind and explodes into colour: a brightly-hued map of Dearborn, Michigan and the staccato of a funk guitar line announce the arrival of contemporary Black Detroit. Connecting the forgotten (white) radicalism of labour's recent past to the racialized present, we are treated to a number of comparatively long takes of Diego Rivera's famous *Detroit Industry Murals* (painted 1932-33), both in long-shot and close-up. These stylized tableaux of the automotive plants become interspersed with moving images of their real-life counterparts, all blown out with the bright oranges of liquid metal and enormous furnaces that pop with the 16mm photography; and then as quickly as this graphic correlation has been established this fiery visual tone creates a colour match with the explosion of the Detroit Rebellion. The conditions of labour and black revolt are inextricably linked, which of course is the foundation of the League's work; and what this relation indicates more specifically is that the conditions of the Rebellion—a mass response to *state* violence—must reciprocally be identified as foundational for most of the labour struggles that were to emerge in the city over the next decade (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, pp. 13-19; Geschwender, 1977, pp. 163-165). In the minute or so following this turn from black-and-white to colour, Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman marshal an innervating, impressionistic image of the brute force of state repression and military occupation that swiftly descended on Detroit: mass arrests, soldiers on patrol, National Guard convoys rolling through downtown. The montage, Morgan Adamson writes, “becomes expressive of a violence that straddles both the interior and the exterior of the factory, a violence that operates as the organizing principle of Detroit” (2012, p. 812). This is nearly 400 years of exploitation and organization, revolt and suppression. It takes only four and a half minutes to communicate. The last shot of the sequence is of a white soldier and a black civilian staring one another down in profile, the letters “USA” painted on the side of a military vehicle glaringly framed directly between them. The credits fade in.

Taken as a whole, this opening sequence strikes the viewer as a very deliberate



**Figure 10 – History of industrial Detroit. *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Icarus Films.**

attempt to reinscribe within the predominantly realist vocabulary of the post-*vérité* committed film the more experimental montage and compilation styles developed during the early Soviet period and applied to documentary most creatively by Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub.<sup>43</sup> But in contrast to Vertov’s famously utopian, avant-garde imaging of the

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<sup>43</sup> Shub (1894-1959) was a contemporary and occasional collaborator of Vertov who, although less well-known than her male counterpart, was a major early innovator in compilation-based filmmaking. Vlada Petric (1984) argues that, along with Vertov, Shub “must be considered the most avant-garde Soviet filmmaker in silent documentary cinema” (pp. 21-22), and furthermore that she was “the first Cinematic Historian, in the sense of ‘writing history with lightning,’ as President Woodrow Wilson said of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*” (p. 41). The compilation film as a mode of historical documentary narrative was during this period being reintroduced into American documentary, most notably through the work of Emile de Antonio. For more on Shub, see Petric (1984) and Stollery (2002).

industrializing socialist city in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman's would-be city symphony in miniature makes for a grubby vision of Detroit as an endless, winding system of highways, factories, and inner city streets, riven with conflicts and contradictions. *Finally Got the News* clearly suggests here a certain aesthetic intimacy between the oft-opposed modernism of *Kinopravda* and the transliterated realisms of its bastard progeny, *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema. Seth Feldman (1984), reflecting on the relative political use-value of early Soviet documentary, argues that the basis for such an aesthetic continuity resides in "the immediacy and freedom of movement inherent in Vertov's newsreels and silent features," qualities that are more often associated with the later French and North American forms (p. 4).

While Feldman's suggestion is meant as more specifically related to the classical period of direct cinema characterized by the work of documentarians like the Drew Associates, *Finally Got the News* arguably pushes his case even further by connoting in practice the basic methodological commensurability of these distinctive *film-truths*—within the filmic context of each side reflexively mediating and reconfiguring the other—in spite of, or rather precisely *because* of, their outwardly conflicting epistemological and political commitments. The incorporation of montage techniques for the purpose of condensing and communicating historical narrative information into what is otherwise a broadly realist text, building on the formal (and technological) framework of direct cinema, is indicative of this aesthetic heritage and the theoretically promiscuous way that committed filmmakers were beginning to relate to the diverse traditions of political film, historical and contemporary, then becoming available to certain U.S. audiences. If the primary ideological ball-and-chain of direct cinema is its presentism and unshakeable fidelity to indexicality as a formal and ethical principle, the simple artistic refusal to abide in every instance by this unmediated presentism introduces the possibility of a hybrid style evident in *Finally Got the News* that, while occasionally crude, is both dialectical and materialist; that is, it offers up a style that moves between and unifies the particular and the universal.

### 3.3. Labour Time and Surplus-Value

The argument about the racialization of labour under U.S. capitalism, which is at the heart of *Finally Got the News* as a cultural intervention, cannot be explicated without a brief sojourn through the weeds of *Capital*.

At a schematic level of understanding, Marx divides the working day into two coterminous portions. The first is that during which the worker produces commodities the (realized) value of which are equivalent to their wages, which in turn go toward ensuring access to those material necessities that allow the worker and their family to continue living and reproducing their labour-power. “During the second period of the labour process,” Marx writes,

that in which his labour is no longer necessary labour, the worker does indeed expend labour-power, he does work, but his labour is no longer necessary labour, and he creates no value for himself. He creates surplus-value which, for the capitalist, has all the charms of something created out of nothing. This part of the working day I call surplus labour-time, and to the labour expended during that time I give the name of surplus labour. It is [...] important for a correct understanding of [surplus-value] to conceive of it as merely a congealed quantity of surplus labour-time, as nothing but objectified labour [...]. (1977, p. 325)

The rate of the production of surplus-value, which is the *rate of exploitation* as such, is historically variable according to mediating conditions such as technological development, market forces, complexity of the division of labour, and the relative balance of forces in the class struggle. The structural drive to competition necessitates that capitalists must continually devise new ways to increase the rate of exploitation, strategies which invariably divide into two basic categories. The first form that surplus-value can take is that of *absolute surplus-value*, which refers to the extension of the total amount of time a worker spends expending their labour-power. This form is “absolute” because the capitalist faces objective limits to how long they can extend the working day, limits posed by the physical requirements of workers in reproducing themselves, and by the frustratingly consistent length of the day—unfortunately for the enterprising capitalist, it is only ever 24 hours (pp. 340-341).

Many firms of course *do* operate 24 hours a day, the auto plants of mid-century Detroit chief among them, but the obvious limits on the growth of absolute surplus-value and consistent struggles over the length of the working day mean that it has historically



been subordinated by bourgeois managers to a concentration on expanding *relative surplus-value*, at least in dealings with (white) labour in the imperialist core countries, and at least since the emergence of monopoly conditions in North America and Europe towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> Relative surplus-value is tied to the rate of exploitation within a given period of time; it “is directly proportional to the productivity of labour” (Marx, 1977, p. 436). As labour is made more productive, whether that be through manual speed-up, the introduction or escalation of automation through mechanization, or increasing the division of labour, there will emerge a generalized fall in the cost of the means of subsistence, as there are more and cheaper commodities on the market for purchase. The same amount of total value has been created as before in the course of the working day, because the same amount of labour-power has simply been expended over a greater number of commodities, but “the daily value of labour-power [in terms of the cost of its reproduction] is thereby reduced,” and thus surplus-value will increase in proportion (Marx, 1977, p. 436).

### 3.4. “Race” as Object of Hegemonic Struggle

As indicated above, there are numerous mechanisms through which capitalists might seek to increase the rate of surplus-value creation. The means at issue here are specifically those composing what black auto workers commonly referred to as “niggermation.” What this crude neologism denotes is a fusion of racism’s dehumanizing violence with automation’s literal dehumanization of the production process. It is the equation in practice of black workers and industrial technology as interchangeable

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<sup>44</sup> Many of the largest workers’ struggles during the classical market and early monopoly stages of capitalism were over the length of working day. Marx’s lengthy discussion of the working day in *Capital* Vol. I contains extensive and disturbing illustrations of the conditions and hours expected of the English and French working classes (including children as young as five or six years) during the Industrial Revolution. One anecdote taken from an English Parliamentary inquiry dated between 1860 and 1863, extreme but by no means exceptional, has a seven-year-old boy working 15 hours, seven days a week, in blatant disregard of the Ten Hours Act of 1847 (1977, p. 354). It is therefore not surprising that in an 1871 letter to Friedrich Bolte, Marx refers to “the movement to force through an eight-hour” law as a properly “*political* movement [...] of the *class*, with the object of enforcing its interests in a general form, in a form possessing general, socially coercive force,” indicating the emergence of a class collectively coming into consciousness of itself (1978b, p. 520; emphasis in original). Similarly, compulsory overtime was a central point of the League’s opposition to company and UAW policies, and is one of major grievances articulated by workers in *Finally Got the News*.

means of production. More broadly, it suggests postwar Detroit as the conjunctural articulation (industrial production during the late Fordist era) of a general mode of experience (racialized super-exploitation) that appears throughout the history of capitalism. Racialization in the name of super-exploitation—that is, exploitation at exceptional or above-average rates—has often functioned in one guise or another, depending on the formal character(s) of labour, the territorial source of that labour, the territorial source of its buyer, and the moral-ideological conditions prevailing in the capitalist and/or mercantile (often colonial or neocolonial) societies in question.<sup>45</sup> What is significant about this particular naming (and cinematic representation) of the super-exploitation process is that it is a theoretical expression that only appears within a *non-academic discourse*. Unlike those academically-produced concepts that traditionally depend on diagnostic “precision in a textual or definitional” manner for their political efficacy, sociologist Joshua Bloom suggests that “where these terms and ideas have precision *is in their practice*” (Mabie, Bloom, & King, 2015; emphasis added).<sup>46</sup> As a *vernacular concept*, developed or informally theorized collectively within a racialized working class habitus, “niggermentation” is about expressing the political-economic, affective, and ideological particularity of black super-exploitation. Because it is simultaneously blunt as rhetoric and ambiguous as signifier, these distinct elements seem to co-exist in a way that evokes above all the *experience*, intimately familiar to the black proletariat to which *Finally Got the News* is addressed, of being worked to the bone by white overseers, day-in and day-out, for the benefit of white capitalists.

Built from the beginning into the League’s theoretical toolkit by the membership and its milieu, “niggermentation” became a flexible means for helping to establish the political solidarities necessary to ground a sustainable black proletarian politics. And yet, despite its analytical and practical influence being palpably felt in nearly every scene of the film, the term itself is never actually uttered in *Finally Got the News*. This is an

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<sup>45</sup> The problematic of super-exploitation in the Marxist tradition is generally tied to the historical development of imperialism. For some of the foundational considerations of this issue, see Marx (1977, pp. 873-940), (1998, pp. 230-265), and (1869); Lenin (1964, pp. 185-304); Hobson (1902); Luxemburg (1951); and Rodney (2018). For more contemporary reflections, see Cope (2015); Smith (2016); and Patnaik and Patnaik (2017).

<sup>46</sup> For context, the distinction that Bloom proposes between the operation of academic and non-academic discourses is formulated in response to an interview question about the conceptual specificity of “anti-imperialism” in the Black Panther Party’s theory and practice (Mabie, Bloom, & King, 2015).

outwardly strange decision considering so much of the intention behind the film—both stated *and* unstated—was to assert a particular interpretation of race and blackness, and consequently to win black workers over to that interpretation. But by declining to name “niggermation”—a term in which all camps had varying degrees of political investment—and subsuming it representationally within non-linguistic and figural forms, the filmmakers actually offer viewers the familiar content implied by the concept while substituting the word’s relatively contested analytic dimension for more theoretically manageable, albeit still popularly accessible language derived from Marxism. Simply put, the Cockrel-Hamlin-Watson group found a way to have their cake and eat it too.

The first time the camera enters one of the plants, the soundtrack comes alive with the grating, clanging, and mechanical whirs of machinery. Returning to black-and-white after the film’s sole colour interlude, the enormous machines and coverall-wearing workers appear to almost bleed into one another, a mass of shifting grayscale to match the estrangement from self and others that such labour engenders. A worker’s voice takes over the narration, sitting just above the alien murmur of the plant floor in the mix:

This motherfucker’s gotta go to that goddamn job every single motherfuckin’ day of his goddamn life. Y’know, and you go to that brother and say, “What do you want?” And he’ll say, “Motherfucker, I wanna get off this goddamn, motherfuckin’, no good, dirty-ass line.”

The anger and despair in this line, couched as it is in cynical, masculinized language, expresses with uncomfortable directness the alienated character of wage-labour that Marx (1977) refers to when he considers the mental and physical degradation wrought by large-scale mechanization: the worker has no choice but to “learn to adapt his own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton” (p. 546). It is not only through the commodities they directly produce that workers experience alienated being, but through the means of production as well, which at this advanced level of technological development cruelly literalizes Marx’s (1978a) contention that “the object confronts [the worker] as something hostile and alien” (p. 72). The long line of machines de-skill their labour, reinforce their alienation, and render the individual’s fundamental capacity for social creation something to be cursed rather than celebrated: “I wanna get off this goddamn [...] line.”

The racial factor mediating the internal stratification of the working class determined to a high degree what specific jobs black and white workers had access to.



**Figure 11 - Auto assembly line. *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, & René Lichtman, 1970). Produced in association with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Icarus Films.**

As DRUM organizer Ron March puts it in the film, “Workers in the ‘hot areas’, [...] the workers in these areas would be 99 percent black. So as a result we organized the black workers.” And these workers in the hot areas were put to work. Between 1946 and 1970, total production numbers for the industry increased from 3 to 8 million per annum, even though during the same period employment only increased from 550,000 to 750,000 (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 85). Recounting the origin of DRUM at Hamtramck, one of the voiceover narrators zeroes in on Chrysler’s speed-up of the assembly line, that old cornerstone of relative surplus-value creation. “At the time,” he states, “they were running 56 units of automobiles an hour on the line. There was no additional help. Workers were doing almost twice as much work one day as they were doing the day before.” The alienation of the unskilled worker, the violence of the unsafe workplace;

these too are essential to the social reality and the experience of “niggermation”. “[I]t is ‘niggermation,’ rather than automation,” argues Adamson, “that best describes the attempts of the automotive industry to regain lost profits during the intensification of the crisis” that accelerated through the latter half of the ‘60s and crested in 1973 (2012, p. 821). While automation represents a significant strategy for increasing productivity, its benefits can only ever be short-term, as the diminished quantity of labour-power that goes into each vehicle contributes over time to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. Continuously automating production to keep ahead of this trend is neither practical nor desirable for the capitalist. Forestalling this eventuality, then, became the driving purpose behind the auto industry’s speed-up of production and intensification of exploitation, which in turn could not help but contribute to the plummeting safety standards that could be found in virtually any plant in America.

Not all of this is necessarily exclusive to black or other non-white workers, however. As Watson points out late in the film, the fundamental contradictions in a class society apply just as much to white workers as they do to workers of colour. Responding in narration to an elderly Appalachian interviewee’s confused lament over the perceived ascension of black workers at the expense of whites, he explains,

The same contradictions of overproduction, the same contradictions of increasing production are prevalent within the white working class, but because of the immense resources of propaganda, publicity [...] which can be drawn upon, white people tend to get a little confused about who the enemy is. [...] Who do they think the enemy is? You know: “the nigger on the street.” [...] Millions and millions of white workers in this country just don’t understand what’s going down, and end up becoming counter-revolutionary even though the contradictions which they face every day would say they should be the most staunch of revolutionaries.

Thus, it is only in the amalgamation, in the totality of the black worker’s experience that exceeds the sum of its parts, that a concept of—and consequently the possibility of cinematically representing—this thing called “niggermation” can emerge. Not long after the black worker quoted above says his bitter piece about the desire to escape the plants, an ensemble of other workers’ voices begins to describe firsthand scenes of gross workplace safety oversights resulting in maiming, mutilation, and death. These are not exceptional accounts. A 1973 joint report by the UAW and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, cited by Georgakas and Surkin (1998), found that during this period the American auto industry averaged 16,000 workplace deaths annually. By way

of comparison, “more auto workers were killed and injured each year on the job than soldiers were killed and injured during any year of the war in Vietnam” (p. 88).<sup>47</sup> In fact, the conditions at Chrysler’s Eldon Avenue plant were so debased that in 1970 the attorney Cockrel successfully defended a black worker in the workplace killings of two foremen and a white co-worker on the legal basis that working in “one of the most dangerous plants in the United States,” compounded by the pervasive, extreme racist violence of American society, was sufficient to induce temporary insanity (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 11).

Of course, the auto manufacturers would never allow the workplace violence described by the narrators to be captured on film.<sup>48</sup> Their graphic descriptions instead hang over the footage of a standard car assembly line as a foreshadow of the imminent potentiality of physical peril. Even though the frequency with which employers could legitimately carry out *conscious and direct* violence against black employees had by the late 1960s significantly diminished, the fundamental condition of social death that characterized slavery remained much the same, only in a mediated and ideologically mystified form.<sup>49</sup> A hugely disproportionate number of those 16,000 annual auto casualties, of course, were black. This all together was “niggermation” at work: exploitation at a grossly accelerated rate, 60- and 70-hour work weeks, the omnipresent danger of injury and death, and ghettoization in the hardest jobs on the floor. It was a

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<sup>47</sup> For further comparative purposes, in 1973 the U.S. Department of Labor registered 132 coal mining deaths in the workplace against a total of 151,892 miners employed (Mine Safety and Health Administration [MSHA], 2017). Of course, these numbers do not account for the industry’s catastrophic rates of fatal and disabling respiratory and related diseases from long-term exposure to coal dust, which was not even subject to federally-mandated regulation or compensation until a major strike wave initiated by the rank-and-file Black Lung Movement in the late 1960s (Smith, 1981). Nevertheless, the difference between coal and auto is staggering.

<sup>48</sup> Even this assembly line footage was reportedly very difficult to attain. It had to be filmed covertly, as the auto companies maintained a strict policy against filming on the line so as to avoid images of plant conditions leaking to the general public (Georgakas, 1984, p. 159).

<sup>49</sup> Of course, capital to this day deploys private security, gun thugs, violent scabs, and other such measures against organized labour with varying degrees of de facto or semi-legitimacy. But it is the state first and foremost that runs roughshod over communities of colour as a structural matter of course, picking up the slack on behalf of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the shock-and-awe power of National Guard and police repression portrayed in the opening sequence, a later scene in *Finally Got the News* portrays the subtlety with which this violence can also be exercised. Having run a popular slate of candidates for local UAW leadership, DRUM and ELRUM were both the victims of electoral fraud engineered by the International with the help of local police, who engaged in armed intimidation, tampering with voting machines, and stuffing ballot boxes. “The election demonstrated clearly to the workers that the UAW bureaucracy was willing to risk outright scandal,” the narrator says, “rather than to allow blacks to control their own union.”

violence that reverberated outwards, affecting every space and facet of the black working class's lifeworld. "So we are explicitly Marxist-Leninist," Cockrel explains for the camera near the end of *Finally Got the News*,

But we are also of course cognizant of the fact that there's peculiar oppression that affects black people. We call ourselves the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and we have to deal with the racial component as it operates in terms of producing and maintaining oppression and exploitation in this society. [...] And it is equally clear that blacks objectively represent the vanguard of this struggle. It is our position that workers represent the vanguard of this black vanguard by virtue of the strategic point in which they find themselves located in the critical aspect of the operation of the capitalist system.

The question of race is rhetorically posed again and again throughout the documentary. The consistent answer offered to this problematic is the affirmative orientation of black working class struggle towards the spheres of production and reproduction, circling as I have argued around the unspoken hook of the "niggermatation" concept. In only one major sequence, by contrast, do the filmmakers negatively deal with the Marxist leadership's black political opposition. Because a great deal of the League's membership believed to some extent in the tenants of black cultural nationalism, a frontal assault on this position might have inadvertently actualized as a self-inflicted wound. Setting bosses against workers obviously made more sense to the members, so the film executes its racial critique by cutting back and forth between scenes of the League's organizing against the UAW and a board room interview where at the end of comically long table a black and a white executive sit and opine on the state of capital-labour relations. Where the implicit critique of cultural nationalism emerges is in the presence of the black executive himself. As his white counterpart silently chomps on a cigar, "[I]ike some agit-prop player in a vulgar Marxist skit," the black exec calmly dismisses the RUMs and happily touts the future of the relationship between Ford and the UAW as a shining example of the dictum that "what is good for Detroit is good for America" (Georgakas, 1984, p. 159). Three times the filmmakers return to the room for short snippets of commentary, and all three times do they slowly zoom in on the black executive at the end of the table, centring him in the frame. The familiar and comfortable critique of class collaborationism, which the League and the film comes back to again and again, is in a sense complemented and completed here with the critique of a kind of racial collaborationism in which the aspiration for a black capitalism, or at a minimum the more humane black management of capitalism, is shown to be impossible. The multi-

class alliance of blacks against white oppression critiqued in these passages is of course some distance from the black nationalism envisioned earlier in the Civil Rights era by such disparate revolutionary figures as Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, or LeRoi Jones before his turn to Marxism—who all espoused some degree of anti-capitalism as a component of the critique of white supremacy—but it is indicative of the ideological limits of the black middle class that working class black organizers were facing by 1970.

The fear of capitulation to black capitalists or black middle class interests was real, and indeed would prove to be a well-founded fear in cities like Newark and Philadelphia where popular nationalist movements elected black mayors during the 1970s who eventually capitulated to white and capitalist interests and sold out their mass bases. The League's emphasis on establishing a firm basis of unity that did not compromise on identifying the capitalist-imperialist infrastructure of race was structured around precisely this concern. From the earliest period of in-plant organizing, DRUM leaders

stressed that one of the major historical lessons of the black struggle in the United States was that it had failed because of "traitors" from within. The "traitors" had often been white leaders who capitulated to racism among white workers or who habitually postponed meeting specific black demands until there was a more "favorable" political climate. *Just as as often however, the "traitors" had been blacks. They had subordinated the mass struggle to their personal careers or had gone along with the cowardice of the white leadership.* As a consequence, DRUM was unsparing in its condemnation of "Uncle Toms, honkie dog racists, and knee-grows." (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 39; emphasis added)

League cadre were merciless in their criticisms of the black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, as they were of the conservative UAW bureaucracy they saw as capital's handmaiden. But the critique of careerism was also directed at leaders like Watson, who many felt was disengaged from the membership's immediate concerns in the plants and in the community. His advocacy for the documentary project, which drained precious monetary, material, and man-hour resources, very often had him travelling around the United States and internationally, and threatened to inadvertently expose League members to outside scrutiny and surveillance, was just one more example of this purported disconnect.



### 3.5. Conclusion

At the close of *Finally Got the News*, Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman offer a refrain of the montage and marching score featured during the film's opening passage. Over footage of work across many different sectors of industrial production and resource extraction, a narrator concludes with a call to racially oppressed workers everywhere, distilling the League's program and proposing what its future development will entail:

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers recognizes that our struggle is not an isolated one. We have cause with other black workers in this racist land and with the exploited and oppressed of the entire world. Our ultimate intention is to organize black workers as a whole, as a class in the United States, and proceeding from that basic mass organization, to extend revolutionary black organization throughout the community. It is incumbent upon us to foster, initiate, join with, organize, and lead other black workers in our common struggle. By being in the forefront of this revolutionary struggle, we must act swiftly to organize DRUM-type organizations wherever there are black workers, be they in Henry Ford's kitchen, the White House, White Tower Restaurants, Ford Rouge, the Mississippi Delta, the plains of Wyoming, the mines of Bolivia, the rubber plantations of Indochina, the oil fields of Biafra, or the Chrysler plants in South Africa.

Accordingly, in many American cities there were revolutionary workers' organizations along the lines of DRUM that challenged established union structures and funneled the energies unleashed by the upheavals of the 1960s into the workplace. The national coordination and inter-development of these groups was to be a primary objective of the Black Workers Congress, a pre-party formation initiated in 1970-71 on the strength of the League's international reputation, and the penultimate step in the march towards the formation of a multi-racial/multi-national, anti-revisionist communist party in the United States.

The completion of *Finally Got the News* was too little, too late for the League, however. Although as a film text and counterpublic address it is an exemplary work of committed documentary, the conditions of its production were inevitably in conflict with the political use-values of the work itself. The filmmakers were treated with hostility by black workers and cadres alike, even after it became apparent that their documentary work had little to do with the political provocations of the Detroit Newsreel majority. "[Organizers] would express their uneasiness about the film in many ways," writes Georgakas, "They would not stop nationalist-oriented black workers from running off white camera crews with threats of violence, and they often failed to inform the

filmmakers of key public events” (1984, p. 156). Members who opposed the project, whether on theoretical or pragmatic grounds, fought its making both actively and passively. Watson was able to get camera crews access to a number of important locations and speakers, but because of this mistrust “[m]any of the League components under [plant organizers’] personal control never appear in the film” (p. 156).

This internal resistance to the documentary’s production should be understood as evidence of a spectrum of agonistic and antagonistic reactions to the Cockrel-Hamlin-Watson group’s avowed goals of elevating the League to a position of political and moral leadership for the black working class across the US—before it had been sufficiently consolidated in Detroit. Some of this member defiance was no doubt founded in an opposition to the interpretation of race through which these leaders had chosen to articulate their line, and on which they were banking for building hegemonic influence, but perhaps even more cadre resistance rested on simple material concerns like resource allocation and organizational overreach. These are levels that the film as text does not and cannot speak to in the same way. Ultimately, the film’s focus on political line—analysis of the “niggermation” experience, which translates to a theory of race, which in turn translates to an organizational strategy and program—is a necessary but insufficient component of the hegemonic construction envisioned by the League’s (counter)public architect Watson. Estrangement from the League’s leadership, felt by many members who believed that the big outward push embodied by the documentary was too much, too soon, inevitably undercut the line struggle being waged at that higher, theoretical level of abstraction. Not coincidentally, this contradiction between abstract line and concrete experience of struggle was to become a recurring obstacle for Marxist-Leninist organizers during the 1970s as they more and more followed the anti-revisionist problematic into the party-building projects of the New Communist Movement period.

The intrusive presence of Detroit Newsreel came to a head in early 1970 when, facing significant criticism over misrepresentations of their financial situation, the group folded under duress and bequeathed all of their film equipment to an outfit at the University of Michigan. In response, the League intervened and seized the the gear on the “legal grounds” that Newsreel had failed to monetarily compensate them for past speaking engagements and on the “revolutionary grounds” that as an organization they had a compelling political need to continue producing radical films through their newly

established cultural front Black Star Productions (Georgakas, 1984, p. 163).<sup>50</sup> Bird, Gessner, and Lichtman stayed behind to complete the documentary after this incident, but by the time it was ready for distribution, the League itself was on the verge of collapse. Several of the RUMs had been forced underground, leading members fired and blacklisted, and in-plant leaders were accusing Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson of foolishly trying “to launch a national drive” from the position of a “withering base” (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, p. 133). Unable to convince their counterparts to endorse aggressive national expansion, Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson resigned in spring 1971 to focus full-time on the BWC.

Third World Newsreel and San Francisco Newsreel both retained prints of the film for U.S. distribution, as did a handful of individuals in radical labour and film circles, but it was actually in Europe, and Italy in particular, that it had found its largest audience. Workers associated with the Italian Communist Party and the Party’s left-wing extraparlimentary opposition alike responded enthusiastically to the militant labour politics. Portions of the film were also sold for television broadcast in Germany, and at least one print ended up in the possession of a League solidarity organizer in Sweden, but the racial content limited its reception in those countries. In France, Jean-Luc Godard was reportedly aware of the film, with news reaching Watson via League supporter Jane Fonda in 1971 that activists in Paris were interested in screening it (Taylor, 2007, p. 49). In Detroit, the city of its making, *Finally Got the News* lived a relatively short life, as the remaining factions of the League, which eventually folded into the Communist Labor Party, suppressed this valedictory expression of their erstwhile comrades’ political line. For a time, though, the League was capable of channeling an authentically revolutionary optimism that warranted the U.S. and international attention they received. As a journalist for the revolutionary newspaper *The Guardian* opined at the height of the League’s influence, “A specter haunts Detroit that tomorrow will haunt the nation. It is the specter of black revolution in basic industry—the unity of national struggle and class struggle” (Robert Dudnick quoted in Georgakas, 1969).

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<sup>50</sup> Black Star never saw any projects make it past the pre-production stage. One such (particularly far-fetched) project was to be a Rosa Luxemburg biopic starring Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland, after the two actors became familiar with Watson. A first draft of the script was even completed. Somewhat more successful was the organization’s sister front Black Star Publications, which briefly operated under Hamlin’s supervision (Georgakas & Surkin, 1998, pp. 122-123).



# “ FINALLY GOT THE NEWS ”

FEATURE LENGTH FILM  
ON THE REAL "DODGE REBELLION"  
REVOLUTIONARY BLACK  
AUTO WORKERS IN DETROIT

## KENNY HORSTON

CHAIRMAN, BLACK PANTHER CAUCUS  
UAW--FREMONT WILL SPEAK

## BENEFIT FOR STRIKING AUTO WORKERS

SPONSORED BY  
WILDCAT & GM STRIKE COMMITTEE

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16

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1249 ALABAMA between 24th & 25th Streets

8:00 P.M.

DONATION AT DOOR



Figure 12 – Advertisement for benefit screening of *Finally Got the News* in Fremont, California. 1970.

## Chapter 4.

### **“The Original Film Was Much Tougher”: *Wildcat at Mead* Between the October League and the United Front**

*The working class and its party must maintain their political and organizational independence and initiative within the united front, by leading the day to day struggles, by promoting the fight for reforms in a revolutionary manner and by pointing out, in this context, the final aims of the movement.*

— October League (Marxist-Leninist), “Statement of Political Unity” (1972)

*In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily “from the masses, to the masses”. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them [...], then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.*

— Mao Zedong, “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership” (1943)

While the New Left as a cultural mood and cycle of struggle was abating after the most intense clashes of the 1960s, what emerged in its place was a narrower but more disciplined style of political organizing. Developing principally out of the collapse of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the left-wing of the black, Chicano, and Asian-American liberation movements, dozens of revolutionary organizations emerged under the loose banner of the anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist (or Maoist) “New Communist Movement” (NCM) between the mid-1960s and the early-1980s. This trend

sought to reclaim the communist heritage of revolutionary class struggle and democratic centralist organization through the struggle to form a new Marxist-Leninist party, which they saw as beneficial—indeed, essential—to ensuring the ultimate success of mass movements like those that had energized the preceding decade.<sup>51</sup>

The NCM was simultaneously heterogeneous and orthodox, attempting to avoid the mistakes of both the New Left and what remained of the Old Left by embracing a radically anti-revisionist form of Marxism-Leninism, grounded in the radicalism and vitality of the late 1960s, but which looked variously to China, Albania, the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin, and anti-colonialism in the Third World for political guidance.<sup>52</sup> Their “anti-revisionism” was conceptualized as a reclamation of the revolutionary core of Marxism-Leninism, which they saw as having dissipated from the Soviet-aligned Communist parties after Nikita Khrushchev’s policy of “peaceful coexistence” with capitalism became regularized in the postwar period. Many of the critiques they posed were vital to the reinvigoration of the flagging communist movement in the United States, but almost from the start the NCM was marked by dogmatism and often uncritical parroting of the policies and political lines of favoured international parties, mostly notably the Chinese.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “Maoism” began as a pejorative term for Marxism-Leninism that was allied with the Chinese critique of the Soviet Union. Most NCM-aligned communists identified as adherents of “anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism” or “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought,” with Mao Zedong Thought conceptualized not as a distinct stage of Marxist development, but rather a defense of its origins and revolutionary character. “Maoist” eventually came to stand in as shorthand for this longer designation. For the purposes of this study, these terms are used interchangeably.

<sup>52</sup> But while China certainly cast the greatest shadow over the NCM, Maoist anti-revisionism should not be mistaken for the sole form that the new Marxism-Leninism took. The positions taken by the influential Communist Parties of Cuba and Vietnam, for instance, were more often than not friendly to the Soviet Union. It is primarily for this reason that Elbaum (2006) prefers the appellation “Third World Marxism” to encompass the totality of the communist positions taken by NCM militants in the United States.

<sup>53</sup> Most factions of the NCM were very slow, if not opposed in principle, to open their analyses to the new theoretical currents coming out of the European parties and universities, most notably the Althusserian and neo-Gramscian trends (Elbaum, 2006, pp. 242-246; Haider, 2015; Theoretical Review, 1977, pp. 1-4). Anti-dogmatic and “rectification” tendencies in the NCM, which recognized and diagnosed many of these strategic and theoretical shortcomings, emerged in the latter half of the 1970s, but they were unable to substantially right the course of the movement, which had been irrevocably harmed by its own sectarianism, as well as the death of Mao and the Gang of Four Affair in China. Some organizations managed to last in one form or another through the tumult of the 1980s, but by the beginning of that decade the NCM as a whole had more or less burned itself out. See Elbaum’s *Revolution in the Air* (2006) for the standard history of the NCM, Saba’s (2018) critical review of the second edition, and Elbaum’s (2018) reply to Saba for a concise debate on

By mid-decade, many of the movement's leading groups had abandoned all pretense of struggling towards a unified revolutionary position, descending instead into arcane polemics against one another and vain competitions to determine who would be first to constitute a "party"—a mostly formal designation theoretically signifying legitimate vanguard leadership over the revolutionary movement in the United States. In all of their sectarian squabbling, most of the new communist formations found themselves isolated from and largely irrelevant to the popular movements they sought to shepherd. But for a short period of time, the NCM represented a meaningful political development beyond the supposed aporia of the sixties and the failure of SDS, at the epicenter of a vibrant synchronicity of post-New Left radicalism, militant anti-racism sharpened by the hard lessons of the Civil Rights years, and a reenergized rank-and-file labour movement.

One of the largest and most influential groups to lead the first wave of growth in the New Communist Movement was the October League (Marxist-Leninist) (OL). The OL is significant within the history of the U.S. Left for a number of reasons, but one aspect in particular that marks it as unique is that it was the only anti-revisionist communist organization of its era to produce and distribute a documentary about its political work. The anonymously directed *Wildcat at Mead* (1972) chronicles an illegal wildcat strike at the Mead Packaging Plant in Atlanta led in large part by OL organizers who had been sent into the plant as employees. While the film performs a familiar propagandist function, demonstrating the effectiveness of OL's political leadership in this majority-black workplace action, it also plays a secondary, far more intriguing role: that of mediating and attempting to mend the OL's relationship with more established elements of Atlanta's black civil rights community in the wake of the strike. As a mostly white communist organization pursuing a program of class struggle under the particular conditions of U.S. white supremacy and anti-black racism, the OL sought to develop ties with representatives of the black working class and progressive petit bourgeoisie that could form the basis of a lasting united front against racial capitalism. Using the film to instrumentally direct the problems posed by the OL's material relations with their potential allies struggle into the cultural sphere, so as to ideologically continue and build on the struggle-in-unity initiated by the Mead strike, the OL filmmaker(s) provide a

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what lessons ought to be drawn from the movement, particularly in regards to the problematic of anti-revisionism, by contemporary Leninists.

remarkably clear, albeit imperfect model of the committed documentary as a discrete political action in continuity with a long-term revolutionary strategy.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4.1. SDS / RYM / OL

At the height of its influence in 1968 and early 1969, Students for a Democratic Society boasted over 100,000 members across the United States, making it the single largest anti-imperialist organization in U.S. history. But because of its size and commanding position within the student movement, SDS was marked by fierce in-fighting and line struggles over the direction of the movement. In 1966, the anti-revisionist communist Progressive Labor Party (PL) began entering SDS as a disciplined faction with the goal of reorienting the student movement away from its basis in the counterculture and towards a “straight culture” workerist approach. PL was the first sign of the coming Marxist-Leninist turn in the U.S. left, but just as competing elements within SDS were beginning to come around to similar positions, PL announced a series of sharp ideological moves, chief among them attacks against various popular anti-imperialist struggles as revisionist or reformist and the denunciation of all nationalisms as inherently reactionary, that once again isolated the group from the SDS majority.

“The irony of the situation,” Fields notes, “is that several Maoist organizations were born out of the attempt to contain the [Maoist] PLP within SDS” (1988, p. 199).<sup>55</sup> Anti-PL forces based in the SDS National Office leadership quickly began to organize under the banner of the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), named for a 1968 position paper drafted by SDS National Secretary Mike Klonsky that had directly contested PL’s credibility on communist grounds. It is significant that the Klonsky paper “presented its strategy as a *better elaboration of Marxism-Leninism than PL’s*. As a result, the central debate during SDS’s final year was framed as a contest over *what*

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<sup>54</sup> As I have indicated above, the New Communist Movement has to date been severely under-examined by scholars of radical political movements. This goes doubly for the history of particular struggles like the Mead strike. While this chapter addresses significant historical elements, considerations of space and focus necessarily limit the amount of historical detail and analysis I can provide. For the most complete—and to my knowledge, only substantive—secondary sources on the October League at Mead, see Taylor (2007, pp. 59-108) and Waugh-Benton (2006).

<sup>55</sup> Depending on the source, the Progressive Labor Party may be alternately referred to by the abbreviations “PL” or “PLP.” The Party was originally founded in 1962 as the Progressive Labor Movement, so period sources often simply referred to “Progressive Labor” or “PL” to underscore the continuity between these two eras (1962–1965; 1965–present) in the group’s history.



*strategy best represented Leninism*" (Elbaum, 2006, p. 70; emphasis added). The unity of RYM was short-lived, however, and before long they divided into rival camps known as RYM I and RYM II. Nevertheless, in the lead-up to the June 1969 National Convention these two groups agreed to maintain a strategic alliance against what they saw as a common enemy in PL's class reductionism and anti-nationalist chauvinism. In the popular narrative of the New Left, of course, this event signaled the ultimate failure of the movement, as SDS functionally split during the course of the convention. Long simmering tensions over questions of race—what Marxist-Leninists had traditionally referred to as the "national question"—boiled over after a statement co-signed by the Black Panthers, Brown Berets, and Young Lords was read on the floor, delivering a clear ultimatum to the assembled delegates:

We demand that by the conclusion of the National Convention of Students for a Democratic Society that the Progressive Labor Party change its position on the right to self-determination and stand in concert with the oppressed peoples of the world and begin to follow a true Marxist-Leninist ideology. [...]

Students for a Democratic Society will be judged by the company they keep and the efficiency and effectiveness with which they deal with bourgeois factions in their organization. (Quoted in Fields, 1988, p. 197)

This provocation triggered a mass exodus of RYM supporters from the convention floor to debate the question of expelling the PL caucus from SDS. PL delegates protested the exit, then proceeded to conduct convention business without them. While the ultimate decision to expel "arguably did not receive majority support among voting delegates," the force of the antagonism between RYM and PL was at this point irreparable, and at this point SDS arguably, functionally ceased to exist (Elbaum, 2006, p. 70). The announcement the next day of their decision to expel only made it official.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> It would be highly inappropriate to ignore the other major controversy of the convention. The day prior to the reading of the national question statement, invited Panther speaker Rufus Walls made a disturbingly misogynist comment to the floor about women having "pussy power," which could be used to draw more men into the movement: "You sisters have a strategic position for the revolution... prone" (Fields, 1988, p. 196; Waters, 1969). The convention understandably irrupted with outrage, and in response PL delegates demanded a formal discussion and debate on the issues of sexism and patriarchy in the movement. Much to their shame the National Office leaders shut down the conversation before the optics of the incident could be construed as a strategic victory for the PL. Although this topic unfortunately goes far beyond the scope of the present study, it must be acknowledged and grappled with that patriarchal and homophobic attitudes were common across large swaths of the New Communist Movement. The Klonsky-led October League, for instance, held particularly reactionary lines on both of these questions, even after many others

RYM I (or “Weatherman”) soon adopted a clandestine orientation as the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), advocating immediate preparation for armed struggle against the state.<sup>57</sup> RYM II, unlike its erstwhile allies, dissolved further as its leaders strategically retreated back from the national to the local level to organize new Marxist-Leninist groups from the ground up. Rather than a strategy of armed struggle, which they knew they had neither (1) any chance of winning mass support for under current conditions, or (2) the ability to carry out successfully, let alone *survive* the campaign of state repression that armed struggle would inevitably trigger, the inheritors of RYM II advocated militant labour organizing by entering workplaces and the working class communities that supplied them. Of these groups, few were more influential than the October League (Marxist-Leninist), which was founded in 1969 by Klonsky and other RYM II cadres as the Los Angeles Marxist-Leninist Collective. Soon changing its name to the October League, the organization merged in May 1972 with the Atlanta-based Georgia Communist League (Marxist-Leninist) (GCL) and a handful of other smaller groups to form one of the movement’s first “national” organizations. The Atlanta group was mainly composed of former members of the Southern Student Organizing

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in the movement had adopted more progressive positions. They were virulently homophobic, denouncing homosexuality as “a bourgeois threat to the working class, women, and national minorities” associated with fascist decadence (October League, 1975). The OL was also quite hostile to the women’s movement as it developed outside of the anti-revisionist milieu. The Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist), which is what the OL rechristened itself in 1977, identified “feminism” as a “petty-bourgeois ideology that serves the interests of imperialism” (quoted in Fields, 1988, p. 209). While the category of feminism was undeniably contested during the 1970s, the frequent chauvinism of the OL and other NCM groups towards the non-Maoist women’s movement suggests that they should not be given the benefit of the doubt on this issue. For thoughtful critiques from within the movement of the NCM’s records on gay liberation and women’s liberation, see Los Angeles Research Group (1975) and Anti-Sexism Work Group of the Boston Political Collective (1981), respectively.

<sup>57</sup> The WUO would later be the subject of Emile de Antonio, May Lampson, and Haskell Wexler’s truly exceptional documentary portrait *Underground* (1976), which I have elected to place outside the scope of this study, as the politics and strategy of the Weather Underground were—despite the rhetorical and theoretical vocabularies they employed—in practice fundamentally at odds with the “mainstream” of the NCM. (Indeed, the WUO was actively scorned by many Marxist-Leninists, who considered militants taking up the gun at this early stage to be inviting bloody state repression.) Shot in a secret location with the core of the group’s leadership, the film functions at once as an invaluable oral history of the American New Left and as a reflexive interrogation of the sometimes extreme political roads taken after 1969. At times the WUO leaders, in attempting to explain their actions, even come close to admitting the fundamental error in their post-SDS embrace of guerilla tactics like targeted propaganda bombings. To be perhaps overly polemical, *Underground* is probably a better film than the more-flash-than-substance Weather Underground actually deserved. For thoughtful considerations of *Underground* within the broader New Left and committed documentary traditions, see Kahana (2008, pp. 196-204) and Waugh (2011, pp. 126-153).

Committee (SSOC), a mass student organization that had played a role on southern campuses analogous to that played by SDS in the rest of the country, and which had folded for similar reasons.<sup>58</sup> The influx of southern communists greatly influenced the direction of OL's organizing, at the same time as it was growing into one of the largest and most powerful forces in the New Communist Movement.

## 4.2. Atlanta as Concrete Situation

Although the Los Angeles-based October League's unification with the Georgia Communist League was built on mutual adherence to the Marxist-Leninist principles of revolutionary class struggle, black national liberation, and the necessity of building a new communist party, the strategic importance Klonsky's group attributed to the city the GCL called home cannot be overstated. In addition to being the economic and political capital of the South, Atlanta had played a central role in both the social imaginary and practical logistics of the Civil Rights Movement, housing the national headquarters of such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent/National Coordinating Committee (SNCC). White elites and the black middle class worked hard to foster the city's reputation as a haven of moderation, selling "[i]mages of relative success among black Atlantans [...] in stark contrast to the desperation around the rest of the American South" (Waugh-Benton, 2006, p. 9). Yet for the black working class, which formed the city's largest demographic by race and class coordinates, the "relative success" of black Atlanta was soured by widespread job and housing discrimination, as well as de facto segregation precipitated by white flight.

As a result, many young communists saw in Atlanta a political lever for prying open the South, even the country as a whole. Said former OL member John Fletcher, "We went to Atlanta because that's really where the action was in the South in the movement" (quoted in Waugh-Benton, p. 35). "With its Atlanta base," explains historian Kieran Walsh Taylor,

October League leaders aimed to establish a new southern front composed of a broad alliance of black workers and radical youth [...]. A revitalized

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<sup>58</sup> Like the NCM, SSOC has received much less scholarly attention than its northern brethren SDS. For a brief history of SSOC's work and dissolution in relation to SDS and the debates that birthed the RYM II tendency, see Michel (2002) and Taylor (2007, pp. 64-69).



**Figure 13 – Mead workers confront police. *Wildcat at Mead* (October League [Marxist-Leninist], 1972). October League (Marxist-Leninist).**

southern front, they believed, would help mend the labor movement's Achilles' Heel—the non-union South that provided a safety valve for corporations seeking to avoid the higher labor costs, taxes, and environmental restrictions they faced in the Northeast and Midwest. (2007, pp. 60-61)

The wildcat strike at the Mead Packaging Company strike, which began on August 18 and ran for seven weeks, was at least the eighth major strike to hit Atlanta during 1972, following black-majority walkouts at Fulton Cotton Mills, Holy Family Hospital, Church's Fried Chicken, Citizens Trust Bank, Regency Hyatt House, Sears, and Nabisco (Waugh-Benton, 2006, pp. 42-58). In almost every one of these cases the striking workers claimed racist discrimination and harassment as primary grievances.

Black workers reported being routinely denied access to higher paying jobs, suffering constant belittlement and racist insults from white supervisors, and being

subjected to arbitrary punishment and dismissal. Because Georgia was only sparsely unionized many of the workers who participated in this strike wave did not have access to formal representation, much less the organized labour resources a strong union could bring to bear against their employers. What they did have, however, were the living brains and feet and fists of the Civil Rights Movement, not a decade on from its most significant public victories. A large and mobilized network of student organizations, black churches, civil rights groups, white activists, and politicized community members proved invaluable to the strike effort in each one of these instances, gathering food and financial aid, facilitating rallies and other political actions, and providing much needed publicity. It would be incorrect to say these groups and individuals were temporarily filling a gap left by labour, as the American union movement for most of its history been at best aloof to the struggles of black workers, when not openly hostile or even allied with genocidal white supremacy.

In the case of the black-owned Citizens Trust Bank, where five women were fired over a requested pay raise, some of the city's more established civil rights organizations initially expressed trepidation about heightening class antagonisms between black capitalists and workers. It was only after an internal struggle that the pro-worker forces were able to steer their respective organizations into the fight against the bank. Waugh-Benton identifies a dynamic intersection of race and class forces and discourses in the way this strike was understood and articulated in the black community. She notes, "[S]trike participants and supporters viewed the strike as a *class issue*. One strike leader claimed that 'black business men who have made it don't identify with us.' [...] They made picket signs, *accusing the bank of racism*" (2006, p. 50; emphasis added). Here, we can see the protestors code-switching between the conceptual discourses of class and race, attesting to the way the lived experience of discrimination often problematizes the strict conceptual barrier that commonly differentiates the two. Instead, there is a practical recognition in this instance of the fact of race as having determinate, structural effects mediating how differently racialized people access different facets of economic life to the extent that *race relations* might be considered in a very real sense *also relations of production*.

At Mead the workers were in the minority locally in that they were members of a union, Local 527 of the Atlanta Printing Specialties and Paper Products Union. Mead had been unionized since 1959, but among the plant's approximately 700 black workers

the union was seen as little more than a buffer for maintaining white benefits and privileges and rubberstamping management's will whenever it suited them.<sup>59</sup> Despite the majority-black membership, nearly the entire union leadership was white; two Local 527 shop stewards, David Lee Craig and James W. Spivey, were even ranking members in the Georgia Ku Klux Klan (Taylor, 2007, p. 75). As for the company itself, safety conditions in the paper and cardboard packaging plant were abysmal, especially in those manufacturing areas where black workers were most often placed. Because of poor ventilation systems, exposure to extreme temperatures and heavy air pollutants was commonplace, and the company did little to accommodate workers who suffered accidents or workplace-related fatigue. There were well publicized instances in the lead-up to the strike of black women in the plant passing out from the heat, only to be sent back on to the line upon waking, with no compensation or allowances made for the time they were out. In early 1972 former Mead employee Melvin Crawford was convicted for shooting a superintendent, supervisor, and union steward, an action that many workers sympathized with. Gary Washington, a young worker who later joined the October League as a result of the strike, recalled an especially extreme case from 1970 illustrating what working conditions looked like:

The year before I came to work at Mead, there was an area that dealt with inks, and there was a vat that had acid in it, 'cause there was this solvent type ink... and they didn't hire any blacks in this area... Two white guys who worked in this area, they slipped and fell into the vat; and when they came back up, all you saw were their skeletons... Those were the kinds of stories that I heard when I started working there. And after that they hired about five blacks and put them in that area. (Quoted in Waugh-Benton, 2006, p. 59)

The Georgia Communist League first assigned organizers to work at Mead in early 1972, after the strike wave had begun but before the formal consolidation of the OL/GCL merger. By this time there were already rumblings about a walkout, so rather than agitate the GCL sought to help the workers develop effective organizational structures that could guide and facilitate successful class struggle at Mead. The result of this organizing was the Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers, a group that met "almost daily" for three weeks leading up to the strike, providing a venue for workers to

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<sup>59</sup> In addition to the 700 black workers, in the summer of 1972 Mead employed around 400 white workers, as well as about 100 other employees including managers and supervisors (Waugh-Benton, 2006, p. 58).

discuss grievances and strategy (Waugh-Benton, 2006, p. 63). The communists originally hoped to develop a rank-and-file organization that could vie for power in Local 527 and oust the reactionary leadership, but the black Mead workers refused to devote their energies to a secondary enemy like the union. As October League member Jim Skillman explained,

[W]e didn't believe in wildcat strikes. [...] If we were in a plant, and they had a union at that time, we saw it as our job to try to organize a progressive caucus in that union, not to do away with the union or set up a dual union in opposition to the union. *Mead was a special case*. That plant was a powderkeg [...]. (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013; emphasis added)

The workers voted to elect Sherman Miller, a charismatic organizer and one of the only black members of the Georgia Communist League at the time, to chair the caucus. This was a position Miller would retain through the entirety of the strike, even after voluntarily submitting to a second vote later on when the Atlanta Police Department announced a red squad investigation of the strike and the *Atlanta Constitution* began running redbaiting stories about the OL (Michel, 2009, p. 11). On the GCL's suggestion, the Mead Caucus went about drafting, in consultation with friendly workers, a list of demands and grievances that could unite Mead behind a strike action. Although the caucus made a special consideration to ensure there "not be any benefits granted to Black hourly employees that will discriminate against or repress the White hourly employees," the overall emphases on rectifying anti-black discrimination and health and safety concerns disproportionately affecting black workers failed to convince most of the plant's white workers to get behind the so-called "Black Manifesto" (Mead Caucus of Rank and File Workers quoted in Taylor, 2007, p. 76). It was around this time that the Georgia Communist League formally became part of the October League (Marxist-Leninist) under the leadership of Mike Klonsky. On August 16<sup>th</sup> the Mead Caucus, with the help of local civil rights leader Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, presented the Black Manifesto to a meeting of Mead officials and Local 527 officers and served notice of a two-day window to comply with their demands. Management's response was to issue a pair of internal memos about building dialogue across management-labour and white-black lines, so on August 18<sup>th</sup> Mead's black workers initiated a wildcat strike of the plant.

### 4.3. Can *Wildcat at Mead* Be Evaluated?

Unlike the committed documentaries that filmmaking groups like Newsreel, Kartemquin, or the Film Group produced either about or in collaboration with their on-screen subjects, no primarily cultural organizations or cultural-intellectual workers contributed to the making of *Wildcat at Mead*. A 2013 interview with Jim Skillman, who participated in solidarity organizing for the strike in Atlanta, provides what scant details exist in print about the film's production. According to Skillman, the film's unnamed director was "someone who was 25 years old, who had never made anything before in his life," a young October League member who had joined the organization and taken up factory work in Atlanta after a period in the student movement (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013). His primary filmmaking support came from his OL comrades and other committed strikers in the Mead Caucus, none of whom had experience or expertise in this field, and all of whom were tasked with organizing and providing strike leadership as their primary responsibilities. And in contrast with the 16mm (and in some cases 8mm) cameras that were the standard for most contemporary professional and semi-professional radical documentary makers through the 1960s, *Wildcat at Mead* was shot on one-half-inch tape video with the Sony Portapak, a portable audio-video camera system that could not only be operated by a single person, but which was both cheaper and significantly more user-friendly.<sup>60</sup> To a greater extent than any other documentary addressed in this study, *Wildcat at Mead* is a true work of amateur filmmaking.

As such, the style and content of *Wildcat at Mead* are both relatively straightforward. The filmmaker adopts formal techniques from across the previous decade of U.S. documentary, mixing a rough, handheld direct cinema approach to crowd scenes and other exteriors with (sometimes equally rough) staged interviews, usually featuring two or more speakers who can project an image of collectivity and build upon

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<sup>60</sup> Debuting in 1967, the Portapak was the first consumer-grade portable video camera to hit the American market. While some, like the OL, adopted the Portapak for purely economic and utilitarian reasons, a new wave of radical filmmakers took up video for its qualities of aesthetic estrangement from the dubious promise of indexicality offered by film. These aesthetic presuppositions find expression in the work of Raindance Corporation and Top Value Television co-founder and early video theorist Michael Shamberg, who, "[d]istancing himself from groups like Newsreel, which espoused and supported violent oppositionality," advocated a new "McLuhanite" media politics that "subtly undermine[s] the analogy between spectatorship and citizenship on which contemporary national politics depends" (Kahana, 2008, p. 301). Needless to say, the political aesthetics and strategies of the new "video guerillas" were neither on the radar of nor ideologically attuned with the October League (Marxist-Leninist)'s revolutionary project in 1972.



one another's ideas for the camera.<sup>61</sup> At key points a woman's voice, speaking with an accent and diction that implies she is white, narrates the action, providing both context and commentary about the Mead strike in relation to the broader strike wave and overall situation of race relations in the South. It is surely this sort of work Thomas Waugh is envisioning when, writing just over a decade after the film was produced and released, he argues for a fundamental shift in the aesthetic values according to which committed or political documentaries are commonly judged:

We have still to muster a set of critical and theoretical principles for dealing with the *aesthetics* of a genre, political documentary, which refuses to meet any of the expectations of bourgeois aesthetics, modernist or otherwise. Instead of meeting the criteria of durability, abstraction, ambiguity, individualism, uniqueness, formal complexity, deconstructed or redistributed signifiers, novelty and so on, all in a packageable format, political documentaries provide us with disposability, ephemerality, topicality, directness, immediacy, instrumentality, didacticism, collective or anonymous authorship, unconventional formats, non-availability, and ultimately non-evaluability. (1984, p. xxii; emphasis in original)

By any conventional standard, the filmmaking craft in *Wildcat at Mead* is quite poor. Its overall structure is sound, but from moment to moment the filmmaker's inexperience is evident more often than not. The camera often cannot hold figures clearly in frame over the course of a shot. The soundtrack fades in and out of audibility (although this has probably been exacerbated by the harsh conditions of the print's storage).<sup>62</sup> Many of the on-screen speakers come off as stiff and uneasy articulating their thoughts. There is an

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<sup>61</sup> The formal technique most conspicuously absent from the documentary's pragmatic raiding of the period's dominant styles is the compilation and critical recomposition of archival footage popularized by Emile de Antonio in his political documentaries *Point of Order* (1964), *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), *Millhouse: A White Comedy* (1971), and later *Underground* (de Antonio, May Lampson, & Haskell Wexler, 1976). De Antonio's films are often patient and analytical, in some cases satirical, building their critiques through the contrapuntal movement of images and voices over the course of feature-length running times—a far cry from quick and dirty Newsreel style more familiar to the former SDSers and SSOCers of the NCM. And while the OL was likely unconcerned with the particularities of copyright law by which de Antonio was obligated to abide, the unavoidable financial costs and institutional-archival barriers necessary to circumvent to even gain access to existing stock footage would have ruled out this sort of filmmaking anyway. For context, consider that nearly 20 percent of *Underground's* substantial \$55,000 USD budget went towards the purchasing of stock footage, even though the majority of the stock footage used in the film was actually donated free of charge by fellow filmmakers (Waugh, 2011, p. 132).

<sup>62</sup> According to Skillman, between ten and twelve 16mm prints were originally struck for distribution. They were all ostensibly lost, but one badly damaged print was eventually found. It was restored as best as could be accomplished given its condition (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013). The digitized version of this print is the basis for the documentary's contemporary video streaming and peer-to-peer distribution.

obvious lack of access to shooting locations and subjects, which limits the visual interest and variety in the documentary's mise-en-scène. But while these problems will likely be apparent to most viewers, it is questionable whether they substantially affect what the film's overall political use-value, which in the last instance is the aesthetic standard according to which a committed documentary like this operates, with its narrowly circumscribed public and purpose.

Because filming did not commence prior to the initial walkout, the film relies heavily on the narrator and the testimony of a number of Mead Caucus members (both first- and second-hand), with varying degrees of success, to contextualize the action and provide a sense of conditions on the shop floor. Crafting this set of voices into a relatively unified, collective voice that can at once articulate the OL's political line on the Mead struggle and preserve the autonomy of the mostly black workers to determine for themselves the stakes and implications of the strike is perhaps the film's most impressive facet. It is especially significant when considered in the context of the OL and Mead Caucus's significant concerns and internal debates over how *Wildcat at Mead* would be received by its intended audience(s). The largest audience for the film was (correctly) assumed to be the growing counterpublic of communists, revolutionary students, and labour organizers in and around the NCM milieu, especially in the South, about which I consider in greater detail below. But an equally pressing potential audience for the film was the broader Southern black working class, an enormous, heterogeneous body connected through a counterpublic network of churches, community groups, workplaces and sectors, cultural bodies, and civil rights organizations. In the course of the Mead strike, this group arguably found its object of figural identification in the person of the charismatic, bigger than life Atlanta SCLC leader Rev. Hosea Williams. Mindfully dealing with Williams in the text of the film thus became a problematic of considerable importance for the OL.

#### **4.4. Building the United Front, or, the Hosea Williams Question**

Williams was a well-known and controversial figure in the Southern Civil Rights Movement. A member of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s inner circle, he was admirably

described in one obituary following his death as “the straight-talking, charismatic, and streetwise field general” of the SCLC and “King’s point man in a ‘good cop, bad cop’ strategy to deal with white leaders” (“Hosea Williams (1926-200),” 2000, p. 70). In the wake of King’s assassination in 1968, Hosea Williams was one of the SCLC’s most forceful proponents of expanding the organization’s work around labour issues, leading campaigns in support of a number of high profile strikes. This focus, in combination with concerns about the optics of Williams’s aggressive rhetoric and his willingness to collaborate with more militant activists who did not share SCLC’s principles—especially those of non-violence—led his opponents to move against him in July 1972 to limit his power within the national SCLC (Waugh-Benton, 2006, pp. 27-28).<sup>63</sup> Of course, it was precisely Williams’s openness and fiery tone, not to mention the star power of his relationship with King, that drew the Mead Caucus to recruit the good reverend to be their spokesperson with the company and give the strike a public face. On the latter point, he did not disappoint. While the October League provided vital leadership to the strikers on the line, by virtue of themselves being vocal presences and through the democratic cultivation of worker leaders like Gary Washington and Betty Bryant—both of whom appear in the film—on the outside, the sheer volume of support, material resources, and manpower Williams was able to enlist ended up being one of the deciding factors that tipped the strike towards the minor victory the workers eventually won.

Most importantly, Hosea Williams brought a level of spectacle and publicity to the Mead strike that it likely would not have had otherwise. A month into the strike, for instance, a large caravan of workers, OL cadres, civil rights and labour activists, and other supporters marched through Atlanta led by a pair of mules pulling wooden carts behind them. Filmed sequences from this mule train and a second one like it held three days later recur multiple times in *Wildcat at Mead*. We see marchers locking arms, singing civil right hymns like “We Shall Not Be Moved” and an adapted version of “Which Side Are You On?”; we also see the protestors being taken into custody, in some cases being beaten and dragged into waiting paddy wagons. These sequences of violence and the ritual of being arrested as protest are the bread and butter of the film as a document

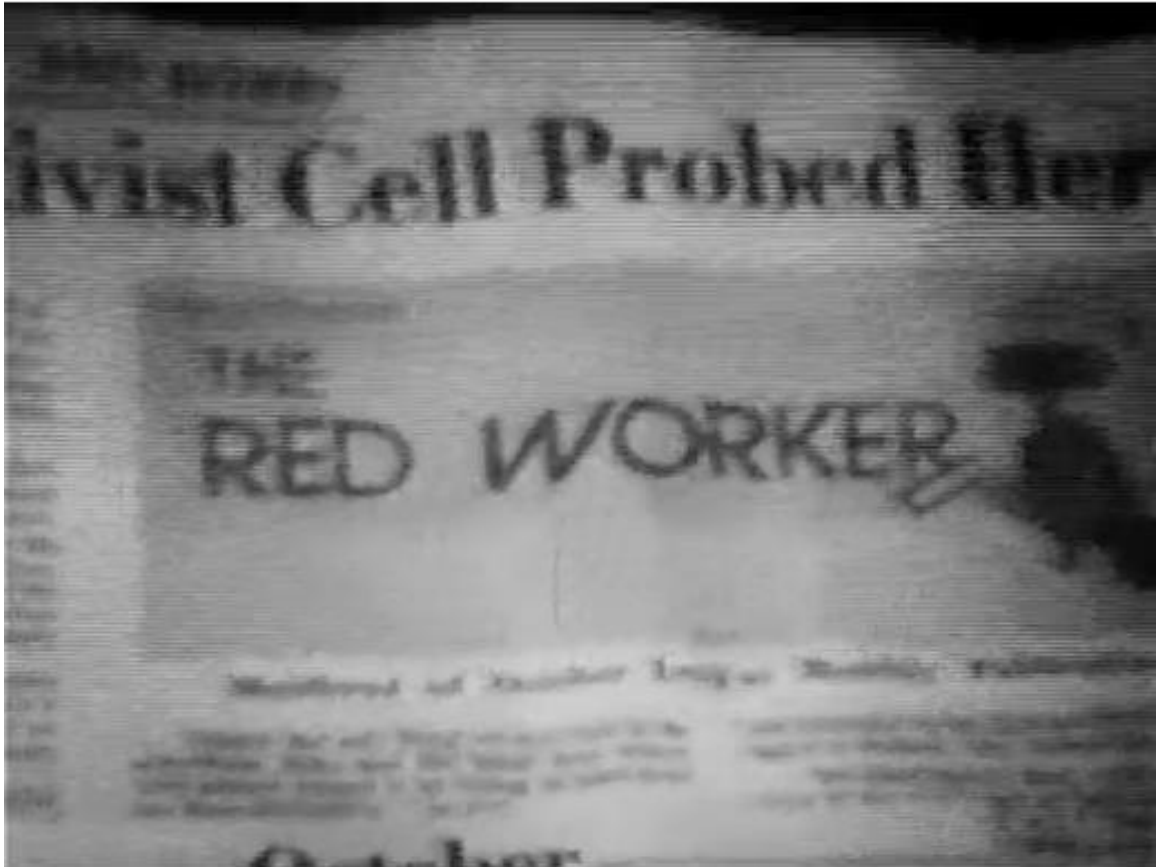
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<sup>63</sup> Williams continued his worker and anti-poverty organizing under the name of the Dekalb-Metro Atlanta SCLC, an independent chapter not formally recognized by the national organization. Nevertheless, he retained the position of SCLC executive director until 1979.

of political resistance, replicating images seen in countless documentaries, newsreels, and television news broadcasts before and since. But, as Taylor notes, the imagery of the mule was also uniquely important to the political aesthetics of the march: not only did it directly evoke the memory of the mules that had pulled Martin Luther King, Jr.'s casket through the streets of Atlanta just four years earlier, the image was intimately tied to the terrible legacies of slavery and sharecropping, "underscore[ing] the humble origins of the poor and mostly black protestors" (2007, p. 88). The further theological dimension of the caravan, unremarked upon by Taylor, suggests, through the the figure of the mule, the Passion narrative of Jesus's entrance on a donkey into Jerusalem in the days before his crucifixion. The political logic of the suffering Christ and his solidarity with black America as a promise of their future deliverance has long been a central theme in the black church—and, indeed, was a central component of the hegemonic discourse of racial justice within the King-aligned Christian mainstream of the Civil Rights Movement—so the visual significance underwriting this gesture would surely not have been lost on the mostly black marchers or the black Atlantans, working class and capitalist alike, who saw the procession go by or read about it later in the newspaper. Tactics such as these, which were foreign to OL organizers whose cultural imaginary more often drew on the aesthetics of the international communist tradition, were also key to building up the mass base of support, the united front of workers and oppressed peoples, that would help to win the strike and ultimately build the revolutionary movement.

While it may seem like simple common sense on the part of the mostly white OL organizers to partner with Williams and the Dekalb-Metro Atlanta SCLC, given their organizing capacity and recognized political leadership among black workers in the city, the actual conditions under which this alliance was formed were defined in large part by the communist tradition of the united front. Originally prescribed as a tactic for mass organizing by the Comintern in 1922, the united front was characterized as an

initiative whereby the Communists [...] join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Every action, for even the most trivial demand, can lead to revolutionary awareness and revolutionary education; it is the experience of struggle that will convince workers of the inevitability of revolution and the historic importance of Communism. (Communist International, 1922)



**Figure 14 – OL newspaper the *Red Worker* reports on redbaiting campaign. *Wildcat at Mead* (October League [Marxist-Leninist], 1972). October League (Marxist-Leninist).**

For Maoists like the OL, the centrality of the united front as a revolutionary strategy was reinforced by its association with the Chinese Revolution, where it had been successfully implemented in the Communist Party’s anti-imperialist alliance with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang during the Second Sino-Japanese War. As such, the united front appears explicitly and implicitly throughout Mao’s writings as the most appropriate political formation for navigating the national—and thus racial—forms mediating contemporary, anti-imperialist class struggle. Writing near the height of that war, for instance, Mao argued of “the relationship between the class struggle and the national struggle,” that

in the War of Resistance everything must be subordinated to the interests of resistance. [...] But classes and class struggle are facts, and those people who deny the fact of class struggle are wrong. The theory which

attempts to deny this fact is utterly wrong. *We do not deny the class struggle, we adjust it.* (1971, p. 145; emphasis added)

So while the NCM for the most part did not assert that conditions in the U.S. necessitated that class war be strictly *subordinated* to the concerns of the black freedom struggle, they recognized that the oppression of blacks and their disproportionate representation among the lower ranks of the working class and lumpenproletariat meant that success in the class struggle depended on winning over black workers and their allies through uniting around popular anti-racist demands in the workplace and in the broader community.

Partnering with Hosea Williams was key to building this united front against racial capitalism. But while the October League was outwardly very pleased with the relationship they had developed with Williams and his independent SCLC, internally the strike leaders were frustrated by the way Williams comported himself in public and concerned that he was not taking a firm enough line in his negotiations with Mead. The OL's contact with him was purely mediated through the Mead Caucus, but Williams was quick to put even more distance between himself and the OL once the company's redbaiting campaign started to come down on the strikers. Even though the caucus and Black Manifesto were almost entirely the result of OL initiative, Williams publicly denigrated their contribution, playing on their relative youth and student backgrounds: "They never do any work. All they do is sit around and philosophize. I don't think these folks could raise 10 people this afternoon if their lives depended on it" (quoted in Waugh-Benton, 2006, pp. 76-77). This attack on the OL was interpreted as part in parcel with the charismatic Williams's consolidation of leadership around his professional activist circle, at the expense of the OL's aspiration to build grassroots leaders through the Mead Caucus. Looking at the strike retrospectively, Jim Skillman admitted that the practical considerations driving the workers were in the long run probably all that kept the ideologically mismatched October League and Hosea Williams bound together in their tenuously assembled united front:

[The workers] knew he wasn't just an opportunist. He was an opportunist, but he wasn't just an opportunist. He was also a leader, someone who could bring something to the struggle. When Hosea would try to tell these people that we were bad news. They would say 'no, no, no.' And if we ... had tried to tell them that Hosea is an opportunist. They'd say, 'maybe he is, but we need this.' (Quoted in Taylor, 2007, p. 93)

As a result, how the OL should represent Williams's contribution to the strike, and how to frame their critique of the SCLC's politics, ended up being the central question of the filmmaking process, despite only being a topic of secondary importance in the documentary itself. Ultimately, the resolution of this clearly *political* question, intentionally or not, positioned *Wildcat at Mead's* political use-value as being principally in the cultural continuation of the OL's strategic development of the united front as their policy for organizing in the South.

"We didn't have any way to edit it," Skillman remembers, "so [the director] took it to New York and kinescoped it [...] and he came by himself and basically put it together" (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013). This initial editing process, which was quite hurried, resulted in a first cut of the film that was highly critical of Williams, prompting a serious political debate within the OL and among the workers. Says Skillman,

In fact, the first attempt he had at putting it together, we felt like it had some problems, and he came back to New York and fixed some of the problems that we felt it had politically. I'll tell you what they were: the original film was much tougher on Hosea Williams. We didn't want that in the final film because we wanted to continue to try and work with Hosea in Atlanta, but Hosea was not an easy person to work with, and a lot of the workers that were on the strike committee would be the first to tell you that. On the one hand, he brought a lot to the strike, it was very good that he was involved, but on the other hand he was somebody that you had to manage, to keep him from taking it over and dominating it, plus taking all the money that was collected. And so, the first edition of the film I think was actually a little more honest about the role that he played. And I think a lot of the workers saw it and said, 'We don't wanna do this,' so we tempered it. (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013)

In the final cut of *Wildcat at Mead*, the political depiction of Hosea Williams hinges around two key scenes of pseudo-monologue: an early sequence featuring the narrator speaking over an image of Williams, and a longer scene near the conclusion of OL Chairman Mike Klonsky giving a press conference in Atlanta in response to the redbaiting campaign. The former scene is quite short, and far more direct in its treatment of Williams. As he prepares to address an assembly of workers, the narrator briefly introduces Williams and the SCLC as allies in the strike. Her voice drops from the soundtrack, allowing him to speak: "The real struggle in this country is between the rich people and the poor people. The real struggle is between the haves and the have-nots. The real struggle is between the greedy and the needy." The sync sound drops out again as the narrator returns, literally couching his words within the OL's textually

authoritative perspective. She commends the organizational resources the SCLC was able to muster in solidarity with the strike, but critiques Williams personally for “attempt[ing] to hold down the level of militancy, focus the publicity on himself, and minimize the role of the workers in leading their own struggle.” This criticism is cold and direct, but unquestionably less damaging than those critiques Williams had himself leveled at the OL in much more public an area at the height of the strike.

The more significant scene within the context of the film is Klonsky’s press conference, a four-minute unbroken take that essentially forms the documentary’s narrative climax.<sup>64</sup> Shortly before the press conference, the strikers had agreed to a deal that would rectify a number of their most serious ongoing grievances. Furthermore, this deal was only reached with the help of another former King associate, Andrew Young, after a previous offer negotiated mostly by Williams had been voted down by the strikers. The strategic unity OL had needed to maintain with the SCLC for the sake of the strike was no longer a concern, and since Hosea Williams had himself stoked the fires of redbaiting that Klonsky was here to put out, he could very well have attacked the SCLC leader for the political opportunism the OL quite rightly saw in his actions. Instead, Klonsky goes to great lengths in this passage to affirm the OL’s strategic alliance with the SCLC. In response to a leading question about the OL’s “working relationship” with the SCLC, Klonsky asserts,

We will work with any group who supports the aims of the struggles we’re involved in. Any group that supported the Mead strike, then we support them and we consider them to be allies in the struggle. [...] I understand that SCLC did support the strike. Therefore, we consider the SCLC allies in the strike, regardless of any differences of opinion that we may have with SCLC or with any other group. If they supported the strike, then we support them.

He follows up this comment with an addendum that the OL “don’t believe it was any one group or individual that was responsible for the Mead strike, and [...] don’t think it’s right for any group to take credit or to claim that it was because of them that the Mead workers struck,” implicitly addressed to both the charge that the OL acted as communist

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<sup>64</sup> Although the narration of *Wildcat at Mead* identifies the press conference as being held at a local television station, Taylor cites a period press account indicating that, rather than reporters, most of the audience members present were representatives of various government agencies investigating the OL (2007, p. 97).





**Figure 15 – Mike Klonsky press conference. *Wildcat at Mead* (October League [Marxist-Leninist], 1972). October League (Marxist-Leninist).**

agitators and to the inordinate attention Williams’s circle was claiming. “The working people of this country,” Klonsky concludes, “they’re the makers of history, not any one individual or group of people.”

The result is a documentary that is clear-eyed in its assessment of most aspects of the Mead wildcat strike, despite limiting the amount of historical and analytical detail into which it delves. More importantly, it is measured and thoughtful about how the cultural production and distribution of this documentary assessment operate as concrete steps within a larger material trajectory of struggle. It is only successful in this sense, however, because the OL filmmaker(s) were capable of responding to the ideas, needs, and demands of the black workers at Mead. This process of tempering—of debate, criticism, and self-criticism—refashioned what was nominally a one-man propaganda

production into a collective work of revolutionary self-expression, configured according to the material and strategic needs of the workers themselves.

## 4.5. Conclusion

The film's post-production period was remarkably quick. Although the strike did not end until October 9, and the director had to take two separate trips to New York to edit it, the final cut of *Wildcat at Mead* was completed in time for an OL-sponsored labour conference on "Communist Work in Factories" held in Atlanta over the Thanksgiving weekend some six weeks later. As chairman of the Mead Caucus and one of 36 blacklisted workers who Mead refused to rehire as part of the settlement, Sherman Miller was tasked by the OL with touring the film around the U.S. to various campus, activist, and labour audiences, raising funds for the Mead workers and lecturing on the wildcat experience, while growing the OL's cross-country visibility. As was standard practice in the exhibition of political documentary, most of the screenings were structured around lectures by Miller and group discussions that could extend the mass democratic principles exemplified by the Mead Caucus into the sphere of spectatorship, systematizing and extrapolating political lessons from the strike and the documentary text as a sort of dialectical extension of the screenings themselves. According to members active at the time of the strike or in the period following, the OL saw a noticeable influx of new recruits on account of the documentary's popularity. Based on the national attention that the strike had received, and general excitement within the NCM about this early instance of effective communist plant organizing—in the anti-worker South, no less—the film tour was by all accounts quite successful (Alcoff, Paris, & Skillman, 2013; Waugh-Benton, 2006, p. 96).

Unfortunately, the national OL would not succeed in building on the workers' and Atlanta organizers' ideological work in promoting ties between workers, communists, and civil rights activists in the South. There are a number of reasons for this, but the prevailing problem can be summed up in a single maxim: "No united action with revisionism" (Elbaum, 2006, p. 198). This idea, which was imported without translation into the U.S. movement from the Cultural Revolution in China, typified an ultra-left dogmatism in the organization that equated suitable politics with holding the correct

theoretical line on various issues. Already latent in the theoretical presuppositions of the anti-revisionism as a problematic, it would increasingly come to dominate their theory and practice as the decade stretched on. In 1975, for instance, the OL engineered a hostile takeover of the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), a popular group at the forefront of Southern anti-racist politics since the Depression that exemplified the sort of united front politics proclaimed by the OL in its original “Statement of Unity” and attempted in its work at Mead. Needless to say, actions like these only alienated the October League from its erstwhile and would-be allies (Michel, 2009). This turn in the OL’s practice was reflected in the intensely adversarial character of its counterpublic life—shared by many groups across the NCM—which took the form of a massive investment in the publication of newspapers, pamphlets, theoretical journals, posters, bulletins, political cartoons, and more. The polemical rhetoric and preoccupation with arcane matters of Marxist theory and international politics in these publications only further contributed to the isolation of the communists from the cultural and social logics of the workplaces and communities they purported to represent.

*Wildcat at Mead* is not a particularly sophisticated documentary text, but as an example of practical cultural work produced by a Marxist-Leninist organization, it demonstrates certain key principles of what politically committed filmmaking can be under certain conditions of struggle and strategic organizational support. The film calls to mind film scholar Chuck Kleinhans’s “response” to the aesthetic question of the committed political documentary so provocatively posed by Thomas Waugh (1984), in which he proposes a diverse set of criteria for the political documentary that centres a specifically *political* standard grounded in a materialist examination of the work’s relationship to its subject: “thorough investigation, an understanding of the history and development of the matter being documented, and *an honesty in presenting the living complexity of the situation and its politics*” (1984, p. 324; emphasis added). In spite of its formal anonymity and many technical faults, *Wildcat at Mead* measures up to this standard precisely because it is honestly attuned to the political requirements set by the prevailing relations of forces in Atlanta and the South more generally at the moment of its production.

## Chapter 5.

### Conclusion: Criticism and Self-Criticism, or, Drawing Aesthetic and Political Lessons

*But now it is a new day, it is time for a higher stronger art, a deeper more thoroughgoing and all sided comittment [sic] to the masses of humanity. It is time for the artists and intellectuals in the U.S.A. to choose sides openly and fiercely and begin to struggle with no holds barred, to carry the revolution through to the end.*

— Amiri Baraka, “Hard Facts: Introduction” (1975)

*Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge.*

— Mao Zedong, “On Practice” (1937)

We conclude with a negative example of the committed documentary, a video work that came far too late after the movement that birthed it had died of obstinacy and self-inflicted violence to meaningfully engage subaltern or working class audiences as an educational or a recruiting tool: *They Say They Will* (M. Roth, 1987), about the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA (RCP). One of the only remaining revolutionary organizations to be founded during the New Communist period, the RCP has existed in its current form more or less continuously since 1978 when, precipitated by sharp internal debates over ultra-leftism and the Party’s position on the post-Mao leadership of China, co-founder and Chairman Bob Avakian purged all of his rivals within the leadership, leading at least a third of the membership—a group likely numbering at least 400—to leave the Party in protest.<sup>65</sup> The organization the primary splitters founded, the

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<sup>65</sup> Membership totals are difficult to judge with certainty, as the justified fear of state infiltration and repression felt throughout the NCM discouraged most organizations from maintaining detailed records about their members, let alone publishing them. Leonard estimates the number of those who split from the RCP at between 400 and 500, or approximately a third of the membership (Leonard and Greene, 2015). Elbaum, meanwhile, suggests that about 40 percent of the membership left the Party (2006, p. 233).

Revolutionary Workers' Headquarters (RWH), would never boast the strength or size of the RCP, but it did manage to successfully transition into the next decade, contributing to united front work with groups running the gamut from Maoists to social democrats as part of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition. On this score, they were among the minority, as very few NCM groups even made it out of the 1970s, let alone found purpose during the '80s.

*They Say They Will* is highly retrospective in content, if not necessarily in tone. Structured around a series of staged interviews with members and supporters representing various races and age groups, the film spins a familiar narrative about the revolutionary energies of the 1960s and the RCP's central work in carrying forward that torch into the present. The director Roth leans heavily on stock footage of familiar New Left touchstones: Vietnam, SDS rallies, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, even Jimi Hendrix briefly makes an appearance. A short scene from San Francisco Newsreel's *Black Panther* (1968) appears, but material from the collective's equally engaging work *Richmond Oil Strike* (1969)—examined at the outset of this study—is nowhere to be seen, despite the significance of that struggle to the early development of the RCP's pre-party iteration, the Revolution Union (RU). It is unclear whether the absence of *Richmond Oil Strike* stems simply from a scarcity of available prints at the time, but what is clear is that retrospective images of Black Panthers chanting revolutionary slogans hold greater cultural cachet for the film's niche viewership, and make for a more exotic spectacle, than middle aged workers milling about a picket line.

Naturally, *The Say They Will* suggests, the United States of 1987 is at a far higher stage of revolutionary development than anybody else might have guessed, and it is the RCP alone who best represent the possibility of seizing the moment. There is a particularly telling and symptomatic moment early on that illustrates just how unmoored the organization had become from the real conjunctural conditions of late Reaganite America. Intercut with staged shots of Party members posting propaganda bills, a female interviewee observes that, "A person alone can do absolutely nothing. You need unity with others and support. Without unity there is no force." As she is making this statement, the propagandists unfurl their posters to reveal the face of Bob Avakian, until this point unseen. Avakian was at one time a leading figure in the New Communist Movement, rivalled only in celebrity by Amiri Baraka of the Revolutionary Communist League/League of Revolutionary Struggle and Mike Klonsky of the October



**Figure 16 – RCP activists post propaganda bills. *They Say They Will* (M. Roth, 1987). Zone Productions.**

League/Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist). Following the 1978 schism and the expulsion of the last legitimate threats to his absolute leadership, the RCP consciously set about building a cult of personality around Avakian, which has since become the core of their political identity. Accordingly, Avakian has himself become an object of much criticism and even ridicule and satire for the Party's single-minded devotion to him as a political and theoretical guru, and for the amateurish and often comically tone-deaf manner in which he is marketed as the authentic inheritor and embodiment of the Maoist tradition.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Asked whether his role within the RCP constituted a cult of personality, Avakian once allegedly told an interviewer, "I certainly hope so. We've been working very hard to create one" (quoted in Oppenheimer, 2008). Avakian's theoretical self-aggrandizement is perhaps best evidenced in his recent claims, first proposed in systematic terms in 2008, to have developed a "New Synthesis" of communism, a dialectical rupture with Marxism-Leninism-Maoism—already a controversial break with Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought that postdates the NCM era—which is ostensibly the most advanced formulation of revolutionary science ever put forward. Although Avakian and the RCP represent an extreme and widely discredited example, they are indicative of the long-term ossification of those tendencies toward secrecy and dogmatism that were prevalent throughout the NCM, in this case left to fester in relative isolation from mass struggle for decades. For a summary of their current political positions, see Revolutionary Communist Party (2008).

In this crude gesture conflating class collectivity and the individual personhood of Avakian, the documentary seems to unintentionally crystalize the inability of the major NCM organizations to follow through on their stated projects of embedding themselves within the proletariat in the face of, subjectively, their own long-term tendencies towards sectarian dogmatism, and objectively, the repression and disaggregation of the mass national liberation and radical rank-and-file workers' movements during the second half of the 1970s. This is to say nothing of the slowly accumulating effects of the long capitalist crisis of profitability signalled by the 1973 downturn, which would soon herald radical new forms of economic management in the form of neoliberalism. "The key sectors into which the New Communist Movement had just begun to sink roots were knocked back on their heels," Elbaum writes, "their economic base undermined, their political strength eroded and their prospects for gaining nationwide initiative all but foreclosed" (2006, p. 184). Along the same lines, Leonard and Gallagher write, "[W]hat was possible [for the RU] in Richmond, California in 1968, was not possible in West Virginia in 1977," where the RCP had turned their primary organizing attentions prior to the RWH split (2014, p. 247). Within a few short years the conjunctural conditions for sustained working class organizing, which had appeared so promising at the beginning of the decade, had been almost completely swept away.

Ironically, the RCP likely only managed to weather this storm and retain a modest cadre core through the paradoxical potency of the personality cult—and at the expense of mass engagement—which the documentary so enthusiastically depicts. But all that is left of the Revolutionary Communist Party of *They Say They Will*, so far as the non-member viewer can tell, is a strange blend of Cultural Revolution nostalgia and denuded, recycled punk aesthetics—the latter hypothetically the mediating form through which the disaffected youth of 1987 will be interpolated by the decontextualized élan of the former.

## **5.1. Newsreel After the New Left**

It goes without saying that the committed documentary movement did not simply cease to exist following the death of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Those groups that had hewed closely to SDS and the student movement, however, were thrown into

definite confusion, Newsreel in particular. Nevertheless, following the fateful SDS convention of 1969 it would be two full years before the flagship New York chapter of Newsreel finally split over white and male chauvinism; by this time, Newsreel's white and Third World members operated virtually autonomously from one another. A few months after the separation, following the inmate rebellion at the Attica Correctional Facility in September 1971, the two camps attempted to come back together and collaborate one last time on a documentary about the uprising. This partnership ended nearly as soon as it had begun, however, with only two of the original six crew members remaining to complete work on the project. The film, which would eventually become *Teach Our Children* (Christine Choy & Susan Robeson, 1972), circles around the central question of Attica as a microcosm for understanding internal colonialism and Third World rebellion in the belly of the beast. But it looks also to social reproduction struggles in the ghettos—and specifically to the women who remain there to lead their communities as their men as banished to the carceral peripheries—to excavate the sources of these masculine revolutionary energies that had so captivated the U.S. Left. It was the first official Third World Newsreel production (Nichols, 1980, p. 29). In February 1972, the New York Central Committee formalized the split, and New York Newsreel became two entirely independent caucuses, “each responsible for its own direction and discipline” (Nichols, 1980, p. 30). The white caucus retreated from filmmaking into distribution-only operations and undertook a period of internal education that eventually fizzled out into nothing.

The new women of colour-led Third World Newsreel, on the other hand, forged ahead with the assistance of original New York member Allan Siegel as a self-declared Marxist-Leninist “propaganda organ for the progressive forces in general and the proletarian forces in particular” (quoted in Young, 2006, p. 153). As was the case with many Third World-aligned groups during the late New Left period, the particular coordinates of this political self-identification should be taken with a grain of salt, however. Because Marxism-Leninism was quickly coming to define the political moment amongst U.S. revolutionaries, it makes a certain amount of sense that Third World Newsreel chose to articulate its particular revolutionary politics in these terms; certainly they were not the only group generally sympathetic to the Marxist-Leninist project, especially as it was practiced in Africa and Asia, to do so. But their “support for lumpen-proletarian ideologies,” as Nichols puts it, suggested a flexible relationship to Leninist



orthodoxy reminiscent of organizations like the Black Panther Party or the Weather Underground Organization (1980, p. 53).

The same definitely cannot be said for the short-lived Single Spark Films, a group that formed out of San Francisco Newsreel's own split around the same time. Part of the reason for the dissolution of the San Francisco chapter, as Michael Renov (1987) suggests, was a turn by certain leading members within San Francisco Newsreel towards the Revolutionary Union, which at this time was the largest anti-revisionist organization in the U.S., and had no problem flexing its muscles in dealings with smaller groups (p. 27). Single Spark represented the Newsreel faction who went with the RU after the split, taking with them the still-in-production *Revolution Until Victory* (1973), about the national liberation struggle in Palestine. Two years later, in 1975, Newsreel reconstituted in San Francisco under a new moniker, California Newsreel. But instead of prioritizing the making of new documentaries like their counterparts in Third World Newsreel, this new group elected to follow a path almost exclusively devoted to distribution. This is a model they have successfully carried through into the present, albeit one that has seen significant adaptations in time with the changing distribution market. Reflecting on the state of California Newsreel near the end of the Reagan years, a little over a decade after its reformation, Renov opined,

No longer can the Newsreel audience be defined as an amorphous mass of like-minded individuals concerned to stay abreast of breaking stories of exploitation and political victories. It's now a discrete body of buyers or renters of a media product deemed vital to the educational needs of their organization or curriculum. What is interesting about this shift is that, to a certain extent, these two audiences overlap inasmuch as the 1980s generation of Left academics, organizers, and educators are largely drawn from that ill-defined body of radicalized spectators of the late sixties/early seventies. (1987, p. 27)

Among Renov's "ill-defined body of radical spectators," or, more generously, this counterpublic, we will find the documentary scholars—Julia Lesage, Bill Nichols, Thomas Waugh, the late Chuck Kleinhans, and others like them—who have most endeavoured to keep the American committed documentary of the '60s and '70s alive as a form to be examined, understood, even upheld as a model of commitment in cultural work and practice.

## 5.2. Drawing Aesthetic and Political Lessons

The title of this thesis, *A New Reality is Better Than a New Movie!*, is taken from the title of a poem by the writer and black communist organizer Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones) published in his 1975 collection *Hard Facts*. By way of closing, I must apologize to the late comrade for my imprecise appropriation of his verse, as the “new movie” Baraka rhetorically eviscerates in his poem is not the documentary, committed or otherwise, but the crude Hollywood movie, the cheap, commodified payoff of the proletariat:

How will it go, crumbling earthquake, towering inferno, juggernaut, volcano, smashup, in reality, other than the feverish nearreal fantasy of the capitalist flunky film hacks tho they sense its reality breathing a quake inferno scar on their throat even snorts of 100% pure cocaine cant cancel the cold cut of impending death to this society. On all the screens of america, the joint blows up every hour and a half for two dollars an fifty cents. (Baraka, 1975, p. 29)

Nevertheless, I cannot but help feel that the sentiment expressed by Baraka’s title perfectly encapsulates the political vision underlying the committed documentary trend of the late New Left period. (Indeed, could it not be said that for a certain liberal viewer the purely observational, moralizing, or “even-handed” documentary is precisely the “feverish nearreal fantasy” of the poet’s vitriol?) In film after film during this period, we find “art” and “drama,” two of the three dimensions identified by Winston (1995) as the fundamental, constitutive elements of documentary filmmaking, to be relativized and subordinated, firstly to the scientific or epistemological element, and secondly to the structural precepts of those revolutionary organization(s) that commissioned their production, or to which the filmmakers were politically aligned. This is not to say, of course, that the advancement of aesthetic quality as a rule has been abandoned in these documentaries in the pursuit of some purely pragmatic or utilitarian political ends. Rather, as I have argued throughout this study, echoing Waugh, what constitutes a political aesthetic in the context of an “ephemeral, anonymous” body of work like the committed documentary tradition, “the common fund of our activist legacy,” must be thought and rethought through a materialist lens, in light of new conditions, new struggles, and new objectives (2011, p. 274).

In this thesis, I have tried to explicate the ways in which committed documentary cannot be properly comprehended as a cultural form without at once attending to it both

as *film* and as *political project*. Furthermore, I have argued, the committed documentary as political project must be understood not simply as the ideological intervention of a lone documentarian or group of documentarians, but as the oftentimes conscious and practical expression, whether implicit or explicit, of the organizational aims of specific political actors within a broader horizon of struggle. At the highest levels of internal organization and discipline, I have offered the communist party and pre-party formation as historical examples of revolutionary organizational contexts and apparatuses for the production, distribution, and exhibition of committed documentaries. The complex interrelations of the different textual, theoretical, and practical levels to which the committed documentary is addressed necessitate the development of a grounded theory of “commitment” as a particular kind of relationship between filmmaker, the political organizations to which they are connected, and the publics they serve, based on the principles of political discipline and responsibility. In doing so, I have looked to the late New Left period in American documentary—a moment of enormous sociopolitical upheaval and, in the same breath, collective investigation, criticism, and self-criticism of that upheaval, in search of new and better ways that an authentically revolutionary movement could be built out of it—in order to demonstrate only a few of the numerous forms that this practice, this aesthetics of political use-value, can take.

I hope as well that the historical record reproduced here will encourage further exploration, from scholars of documentary as well as those outside the discipline, of the rich political reservoir of material offered by the New Communist Movement and its broader influence on the Left. This is a body of thought, experience, and cultural production that remains virtually untouched, although it is now nearly 50 years in age, and many of the cadres, activists, organizers, and writers who gave years, even decades of their lives to it are beginning to pass away. Its broader political lessons as well as, I would wager, the more specific lessons offered by committed documentary works like *Finally Got the News* or *Wildcat at Mead*, are timely, and we would do well to learn all that we can from them. Reflecting on the example of the New Communist Movement for a contemporary Left facing ascendant white supremacy and fascism every bit as ferocious as the conservative revanchism of the 1970s and '80s, historian Max Elbaum (2018) concludes,

Utilizing a rigorous Marxist framework to analyze the world is an excellent place to start. But there is no framework, no formula, no method that directly

yields—much less guarantees—an accurate assessment of objective conditions, the balance of class and social forces or what the next phase of battle will look like. Without that kind of assessment, one cannot succeed in politics, that is, in changing the world. That’s why Lenin wrote that “concrete analysis of concrete situations” was the “living soul” of Marxism.

It is both regrettable and inevitable that the limited scope of this study, in terms of the films and political movements I have been able to assemble together, has necessitated that a wide swath of the committed documentary of the era, including works emerging from the late and post-New Left milieu interrogated here, have had to be set aside. There are innumerable webs of history to be rediscovered of committed documentary filmmaking on radical labour, women’s liberation, anti-racism and national liberation, queer liberation, disability liberation, and more. It should not be surprising, of course, that the cultural body of committed documentary is nearly as vast as the body of contemporary political struggle itself. “Fortunately,” as Waugh wrote of the various unfortunate gaps in the survey provided by his own collection *“Show Us Life”*, “there is plenty of scope for sequels” (1984, p. xxvi). Those expectant words were written over three decades ago, and while many of his hoped for sequels have indeed been penned by scholars and documentary practitioners in the intervening years, still more works remain unearthed, their histories undiscovered and unwritten. Luckily for us, there are many more lessons still to be drawn.

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