

# **Fuelling the Nation: Imaginaries of Western Oil in Canadian Nontheatrical Film**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Background** Canadian nontheatrical cinema has historically positioned natural resource extraction as intrinsic to the country's economic development and national identity. During the 1940s and 1950s in particular with the discovery of Alberta's vast oil reserves, industrial and documentary films about oil extraction associated petroleum with nation-building and modernization.

**Analysis** This article examines *The Story of Oil* (1946, produced by the National Film Board of Canada), *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949, sponsored by Imperial Oil), and *Underground East* (1953, sponsored by Imperial Oil) as examples of such "petro-films" following the oil booms in Turner Valley and Leduc, Alberta.

**Conclusion and implications** The author demonstrates how these texts sought to position Western oil development in relation to contemporaneous resource industries, namely wheat agriculture and ranching. These films leveraged such comparisons to other regional "fuels" to situate petroleum within pre-existing national imaginaries about Canada's twentieth-century resource economy, and normalize the oil industry's land-use practices and transportation infrastructures like pipelines.

**Keywords** Environmental Humanities; Canadian film history; Imperial Oil Company; National Film Board of Canada; Natural resource extraction; Petroleum

## **RÉSUMÉ**

**Contexte** Historiquement, le cinéma canadien non théâtral a établi un lien intrinsèque entre l'extraction des ressources naturelles, le développement économique, et l'identité nationale du pays. Durant les années 1940 et 1950, en particulier, avec la découverte des vastes réserves de pétrole de l'Alberta, les films documentaires et industriels sur l'extraction ont associé pétrole, modernisation et construction de la nation.

**Analyse** Cet article traite des films *The Story of Oil* (1946, financé par l'Office Nationale du Film du Canada), *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949, financé par l'Impériale), ainsi qu'*Underground East* (1953, financé par l'Impériale) comme représentatifs de ces « pétro-films » qui ont suivi l'essor des industries pétrolières de Turner Valley et Leduc, Alberta.

**Conclusion et implications** L'auteur démontre comment ces textes ont cherché à associer le développement du pétrole dans l'Ouest avec les industries contemporaines du secteur

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*primaire : agriculture du blé et élevage. Cette comparaison avec d'autres « carburants » régionaux a permis de situer le pétrole à l'intérieur d'un imaginaire national préexistant, construit autour de l'économie canadienne des ressources primaires au vingtième siècle. Elle contribue à normaliser les pratiques d'utilisation du territoire par les industries pétrolières, et leurs infrastructures de transport comme les pipelines.*

**Mots clés** Humanités environnementales; Histoire du film canadien; Compagnie Pétrolière Impériale Limitée; Office Nationale du Film du Canada; Extraction des ressources naturelles; Pétrole

A golden field stretches outward, marked by mounds of cut wheat, abutting the edge of a forest on the horizon. As the camera pans right following the crest of the field, a horse-drawn wagon slowly traverses the film frame, as a farmer slowly cuts the tall wheat. The afternoon sunlight casts long shadows across this prairie landscape. The subsequent shot depicts a second field, in which a farmer—by tractor this time—continues the harvest under a steel-blue sky. Finally, a medium shot offers the viewer a closer perspective of a farmer's work. His draft horses stand patiently as he forks heavy sheaths of grain onto a wagon. It is a physical, demanding task; nevertheless, the scene offers a bucolic, almost idyllic vision of agrarian life, in which the farmer can be his own master of the land and everything he reaps from it. A light orchestral score floats through these scenes, accompanying the voice of an anonymous farmer. A folksy narrator, he testifies to his audience that the harvest serves as a livelihood, and existential compass. He and his neighbours helped to clear and till the prairie landscape “years ago.” This “good earth” that he tends will become a “heritage” for his children, and the generations of agriculturalists to follow.

Yet this proposed heritage encompasses not only the rich soil and acres of cereal plants swaying in the prairie winds. As the narrator of this opening sequence of *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949) attests, “other men” sought to cultivate another “harvest” from the land. A final camera pan across a stony field reveals the technological mechanism of this second crop: a spindly oil derrick, jutting high into the sky. Here, the film's analogy between Western wheat farming and the commercial extraction of subterranean reserves of fossilized prehistoric plants renders petroleum as another one of nature's bounties, and one which co-exists in harmony with agrarian traditions.

*A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), sponsored by the Imperial Oil Company (Imperial Oil) and produced by Crawley Films Limited, is one of dozens of nontheatrical, industrial, and educational films produced in Canada from the 1940s to the 1950s to promote oil exploration and development in Alberta and the other Western provinces. Imperial Oil<sup>1</sup>—like its international competitors BP, Iraq Petroleum Company, and Royal Dutch Shell—turned to cinema as a communications technology to legitimize its corporate operations following Imperial's 1947 discovery of crude oil in Leduc, Alberta, and to advertise those products and lifestyles dependent upon petro-modernity. Since its formation in 1939, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) also sought to use cinema to communicate a variety of pro-development discourses to Canadian and international publics about Western oil. Such corporate and public-sector oil films were in-

tended to entertain viewers, while educating them about petroleum's potential contributions to Canadian political economy and society.

In light of Canada's history as a resource economy, this article inquires into how Canadian nontheatrical "petro-films" released in the decades following the oil booms in Turner Valley and Leduc, Alberta, sought to position domestic oil development in relation to pre-existing and contemporaneous resource industries, particularly those that served as visual metaphors for Western Canada, such as wheat agriculture and ranching. How did private- and public-sector films visualize or obscure historical tensions between oil as an emerging energy industry and other industries that "fuelled" Canadian national imaginaries and metabolisms? What interests might these comparisons have served? To answer these queries, this article examines the films *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949, sponsored by Imperial Oil), *The Story of Oil* (1946, produced by the NFB), and *Underground East* (1953, sponsored by Imperial Oil) as examples of industrial and educational films about oil development and pipeline construction that deploy analogies between the (non-renewable) harvest of hydrocarbons and other regional fuels. In doing so, these texts overlook these industries' distinct histories in Western Canada, especially in relation to land-use practices and laws around surface and subsurface resource rights, so as to situate oil within pre-existing national imaginaries about Canada's twentieth-century resource economy.

### **Nontheatrical filmmaking and oil: An overview of a useful cinema**

In February 1947, one of the exploratory wells drilled by Imperial Oil, Leduc No. 1, struck crude oil near Leduc, Alberta. This discovery, which proved to be a highly prolific reserve, sparked an oil boom in the province, with an explosion of exploratory oil wells and a nearly sevenfold growth in crude production by 1952 (Penfold, 2016). Prior to this, a number of earlier boom-and-bust cycles occurred in western Ontario, southern Alberta, and the Northwest Territories, the earliest dating to the 1860s in Petrolia and Oil Springs, Ontario (Ross, 1917). In 1914, oil and natural gas were found in Turner Valley, southwest of Calgary, sparking another massive drilling boom and land speculation in the interwar years. Leduc, like Turner Valley before it, helped transform Alberta's economy during the 1950s from an agricultural to a petroleum economy, with the province soon supplying over half of Canadians' oil needs (Penfold, 2016).

In response to this emerging energy industry, the Canadian government and petroleum companies such as Imperial Oil began producing industrial, educational, and sponsored films in the 1940s to communicate fossil fuel development to viewing publics. These nontheatrical oil films, so termed for their exhibition outside of commercial film theatres, depicted a range of industrial and social subjects in relation to oil: the construction of pipelines and tanker routes to transport crude oil, and exploratory drilling in Western Canada. The consistent theme of many of these sponsored films was that oil, and the industrial processes of its extraction, could contribute to Canada's wartime and postwar nation-building and economic prosperity.

Given the recent environmental turn within media and communication studies, and the growing body of scholarship dedicated to energy cultures, a number of film and media scholars have thoughtfully theorized the global production and circulation of films about energy and, specifically, oil. Mona Damluji (2015), in researching spon-

sored filmmaking by British petroleum industries in the Middle East and the globalization of the British documentary film movement, has observed that corporations and “compliant states used film as a powerful public relations tool to shape global imaginaries of oil and its role in modern nation-building” (p. 148). Sponsored films about oil therefore offer fertile grounds for analysis of the entanglement of petroleum extraction with national and imperial interests, as Damluji and other scholars have shown (see Banita, 2014; Canjels, 2009; Damluji, 2015). At the same time, the history of cinema as a commodity, technology, and cultural text is also bound up with that of energy infrastructures, since cinema’s constituent technologies rely upon the consumption of fossil fuels, light, human labour, and other energy sources (Bozak, 2012; LeMenager, 2014).

Yet despite the prolific output of films on the subject by the NFB and independent production companies such as Crawley Films,<sup>2</sup> the ways in which Canadian pictures have been used to promote, critique, and visualize the development of fossil fuels and other energy resources have garnered little scholarly attention in Canadian film and communication studies. Given the niche subjects of nontheatrical and sponsored films, and the frequent barriers to accessing archival prints, relatively scant work has been published on the rich history of nontheatrical filmmaking practices around industrial and scientific subjects, including films about natural resource extraction. Furthermore, histories of Canadian cinema, Zoë Druick (2007) notes, have generally privileged the development of documentary via the National Film Board as the primary institution shaping Canadian film culture in the postwar period. Established under the National Film Act in May 1939, the NFB was tasked with the mandate to “tell stories about Canadian society in its ongoing formation” (as cited in Druick, 2007, p. 12) through cinema. Although the NFB has certainly played a dominant role in shaping Canadian film cultures—and Canadians’ twentieth-century fascination with oil—an emphasis on the institution has served to marginalize important contributions from the private sector, such as those by industry.

Within Canada, private- and public-sector films depicting petroleum extraction engaged with a number of narratives and mythologies around petroleum. Some, like the short documentary *Battle for Oil* (Legg, 1942) from the NFB’s wartime “Canada Carries On” series, sought to contextualize the then-emergent oil industry in Turner Valley, Alberta, within global struggles to secure fuel reserves for the war effort. According to the Educational Film Library Association’s rental guide, *Battle for Oil* was intended to communicate petroleum’s strategic importance to the Allied countries during World War II and position the fortification of petroleum resources as a key front within the war effort (National Film Board of Canada, c. 1942). The principal take-away for viewers of *Battle for Oil*, the guide insists, is that oil has become the “most important of the natural resources in the present war” (p. 2). Oil is, therefore, crucial to Canada’s military successes, practically as well as ideologically.

In contrast, other short pictures strove to project an image of petroleum’s centrality to modern life in Canada, positioning oil development as a vehicle for progress and modernization. *The Story of Oil* (1946), for instance, traces this fuel from the fields of Turner Valley through the various stages of surveying, exploratory drilling, and con-

struction of a derrick, and shipment of crude to refineries. The film concludes with a sequence of a typical White Canadian family who might use petroleum products in their domestic lives: a young lad in a Cowichan sweater oiling his bicycle, a girl cleaning her Singer sewing machine, and a housewife (with wedding ring and floral apron) pouring paraffin into canning jars to seal her fruit preserves. These staged scenes are summarized by the voice-over narrator, who declares oil's importance to "our modern way of living." Films such as this resonate with Brian Jacobson's (2017) observation that corporations like Shell and its competitors BP, Total, and Exxon used cinema, to "forge positive associations between oil and the good life only it could provide" (para. 5), including air travel, the family car, and leisure activities. Oil, these films softly insinuated, could offer consumers a veritable "ticket to the future" (para. 6) and comfortable lifestyles in the present.

The nontheatrical films examined in this article can be characterized as examples of "useful cinema," an elastic mode of filmmaking that emerged in parallel to commercial entertainment cinema. Habitually screened outside of conventional movie theatres (thereby transforming spaces such as classrooms, factories, church basements, storefronts, and city transportation into exhibition venues), nontheatrical cinema worked to produce viewing subjects "in the service of public and private aims" (Acland & Wasson, 2011, p. 2). Such forms of small-gauge amateur and professional filmmaking—including sponsored and industrial filmmaking, home movies, educational cinema, and civic films—emphasize cinema's utility as a mode of communication over its entertainment or aesthetic possibilities (although some nontheatrical filmmakers certainly aspired to make their films both educational and entertaining). As a communication technology, nontheatrical films have the potential to reach a wide range of audiences through community, religious, institutional, and commercial networks, to convey various ideological, political, or commercial messages. Such films, Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson (2011) assert, were made by individuals and institutions to serve specific desires and achieve certain tasks, "to do something in particular" (p. 3, emphasis in original). As forms of useful cinema, sponsored and public-sector oil films served to contribute as well to "the longevity of institutions seemingly unrelated to cinema" (p. 4), including the nation-state, regional resource economies, and global petro-capitalism.

These texts can also be situated within the country's broader history of sponsored film production, which developed in parallel with the expansion of commercial fiction filmmaking practices. According to Peter Morris (1992), corporate and private interests have floated film productions to alternatively support the expansion of specific energy companies, advertise products, and encourage European settlement in parts of Western Canada. Prominent early examples of the use of cinema to promote specific ideologies supporting White settlement and land-use practices to audiences include the Edison Company's production of sponsored films in 1898 for the Massey-Harris Company (which manufactured agricultural equipment) in Toronto, Ontario, and the Canadian Pacific Railway's sponsored immigration films like *New Homes Within the Empire* (1922).<sup>3</sup> While the passage of time and an absence of original production context can certainly render nontheatrical texts ambiguous documents, Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (2009) contend that nontheatrical films remain historically and in-

dustrially significant precisely because their textual content is mutually constitutive of the conditions of creation and the contexts of their intended use.

The utility and institutional contexts of nontheatrical oil films position them as a communication technology as much as text, which can communicate social and industrial organizations of power and discourses about the world. This article aims to contribute to Canadian film and media scholarship by taking up this collection of sponsored and public-sector oil films as forms of useful cinema to interrogate the ways in which these texts communicated oil during Canada's mid-century emergence as an oil-producing nation. In doing so, it builds upon pre-existing studies of contemporary documentary depictions of Western petroleum, from conventional oil to oil sands developments (Szeman, 2012; Takach, 2014).

### **Oil, cattle, and wheat: Energy industries in the Prairies**

The resource economies of the Prairies have done much to shape popular imaginaries of the Canadian West. According to Geo Takach (2014), landscape and the ways in which people have turned to these environments for survival and economic profit prominently emerge in visual representations of Alberta from the nineteenth century onward. In a "place where people have always relied primarily on the land for subsistence, from furs, cattle, and wheat through to forests, coal, conventional oil and natural gas, coal bed methane, and the [bituminous] sands," Takach (2014) writes that corporations like the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the Government of Canada deployed popular images of "golden wheat fields, cowboys riding the open range, and soaring Rocky Mountain peaks" (pp. 89–90) to attract settlers, foreign investment, ranchers, and tourists. While popular iconography of the West emerged across both sides of the Canada–U.S. border, Max Foran (2004) contends that the specific "romance associated with ranching" (p. 313) in the region predates and exceeds the better-known Western mythologies from Hollywood. Foran traces examples of ranching imagery back to provincial promotional publications from the 1880s, urban marketing strategies that positioned Calgary as a beef capital, and Western farmers associations like the Western Stock Growers Association, founded in 1896. Grain elevators, Geoffrey Simmins (2004) remarks, offered another highly visible and identifiable symbol for the agricultural system in Western Canada from the 1920s onward, emerging as a part of "the mythology of prairie settlement" (pp. 206).

Such iconography of the West, rooted in ranching and wheat agriculture, appears across many twentieth-century Canadian industrial and documentary films—barbed wire fences running along property lines, grain elevators, the CPR transporting supplies and crops across the vast landscape, and cattle runs led by men on horseback. The prevalence of these images undoubtedly reflects the economic importance of both cattle ranching and wheat agriculture to the region. Since the late nineteenth century, beef emerged as a key resource staple for the Prairies and Canadian export trade, representing one of the most prominent and economically powerful agrarian industries, second only to wheat (Foran, 2004). Significantly, many nontheatrical films about the emerging and later, booming petroleum industry in southern Alberta appropriated aspects of these popular imaginaries. *The Story of Oil* (1946), *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), and *Underground East* (1953) all depict oil in close relationship to wheat agri-

culture and cattle ranching, effectively situating petroleum as an industry in co-existence with these established industries and their related land-use practices and lifestyles, rather than one that might pose challenges to them.

Even as ranching and wheat agriculture fuelled imaginaries of the Prairies on-screen and in other areas of culture, both agrarian enterprises also quite literally produced fuel for human and animal metabolisms alike. In her speculative analysis of fuel and energy systems, Karen Pinkus (2016) defines fuels as “potentialities” (p. 1), forms of power that have not yet been mobilized, consumed, or realized. In proposing such a wide definition of fuel, Pinkus ponders, “Can any object—living or dead—that moves another object be considered a fuel in the broadest sense?” (p. 21). Organic materials, or biomasses, like agricultural waste and corn can be processed to manufacture certain types of commercial fuels. All fuels, in turn, can be burned or otherwise broken down to produce energy. As “the fundamental ability to do work” (p. 1), energy can refer to both constructed energy systems such as electrical grids or infrastructures of nuclear power and metabolic systems. Following Pinkus (2016), wheat and beef in fact function as fuels, powering working bodies in both Alberta and the rest of Canada. And like corn, which requires “processes of transformation” (p. 38) to produce ethanol, these other food fuels are subjected to processes of conversion into energy within these bodies. Conceptualizing wheat and beef in this way can help to better visualize the connections established in these texts between cattle ranching, cereals agriculture, and petroleum extraction. As three distinct yet interrelated forms of energy industries, the production of oil, cattle, and wheat all imply specific land-use practices, the significance of which is explored in the final section of this article.

In *The Story of Oil* (1946), petroleum is situated in relation to cattle ranching as well as forms of animal power. As part of the NFB’s “Canadian Work and Wealth Series,” the title card for the series includes images of six beavers, each of which is attired for a different occupation: farmer, miner, logger (the natural occupation of a beaver), businessman, porter, and fisherman. As is immediately apparent, most of these occupations align with Canada’s resource industries: logging, mining, fishing, and agriculture. From the onset, then, this “story” of oil’s exploration and development in Leduc is situated among other public-sector narratives about the country’s political economy, especially its resource industries.

Following the opening sequence of a petrol station and an establishing shot of “the foothills of Alberta,” in which cars can be seen motoring down a dusty country road, the film juxtaposes the source of this modern fuel with other forms of animal energy in Turner Valley’s “range country.” After establishing shots of tiny residential towns scattered around the area, popping up along with the oil fields, there is a panning shot of a herd of horses following a road. The camera pans right to the horses as they meander across the frame to cross a small bridge. The herd is being driven by a rancher on horseback, wearing his brimmed cowboy hat and riding chaps. As he slowly guides the horses across the bridge, the camera halts to include the bridge of the left-hand side of the frame and a tall oil derrick emerging from the local brush and trees on the far right. The shot is short, a second or two, but this momentary juxtaposition nevertheless echoes the narrator’s comparison between horsepower as the energy

source of old and petroleum as a more powerful, modern fuel source. In this “range country for the herds of half-wild horses,” the narrator proclaims, “the towers of a newer power” rise to produce oil power that is “stronger and swifter than they.”

This reference to the cowboy’s iconic steed invokes the well-worn articulation of the internal combustion engine in terms of horsepower. At the same time, although the enormous economic potential, and potential power, contained within this fossil fuel is emphasized throughout *The Story of Oil* (1946), its potential to destabilize Western agriculture is carefully papered over in such scenes. The depictions of pipelines put forward in the film, for instance, serve this aim of co-existence by positioning these highly disruptive and risky transportation infrastructures as a new component of the Western range imaginary. After the film establishes this comparison in the aforementioned scene, it is repeated in a striking image of a pipeline running through the prairie grass in the film’s conclusion. The camera is positioned nearly on the level of the ground, and the pipe runs from the left-hand corner of the frame in the foreground and stretches into the distance. Running nearly parallel to the pipeline is a barbed wire fence, demarcating a cattle range, with the Rocky Mountains distantly visible along the horizon. The wind softly rustles the long grasses that shelter the pipe and lower wires of the fence. This highly visual parallel between the pipeline and the fenceline can be read metaphorically, to speak to the co-existence of the two industries.

Despite the disparate funding models and differing motivations for film production between Imperial Oil and the National Film Board, Imperial’s sponsored films also deployed analogies between petroleum, wheat, and beef. Imperial Oil, which did not establish an independent film unit (unlike BP and Shell), financed the production of films for internal and external purposes from the 1930s through the late twentieth century. *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949) and *Underground East* (1953), produced by Crawley Films under the supervision of producer and cameraman Gerry Moses, share several thematic similarities. Like *The Story of Oil* (1946), they address the extraction and transportation of crude from Alberta oil fields to refineries in other parts of the province and, in the case of *Underground East* (1953), to as far east as Ontario. Both also contain documentary footage of Imperial’s oil fields, along with animated maps of the resource geography, to convey overlapping narratives about the technological challenges and successes of oil development.

In *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), food cultivation and fossil fuel production come together in the presentation of oil as a crop that, like wheat, can be cultivated and harvested from prairie fields. As explored at the outset of this article, wheat agriculture is visually juxtaposed against the infrastructures of petroleum extraction, to establish this analogue between wheat and petroleum. Given that Imperial’s derricks struck oil within some of the most productive agricultural land in the country, *A Mile Below the Wheat* attempts to project an image of peaceful and beneficial co-existence between Alberta’s oilmen and farmers, and the two industries’ respective infrastructures. Unlike most industrial and educational films from the 1930s to the 1950s, which relied upon an expository “voice of god” narration (Druick, 2007, p. 7), *A Mile Below the Wheat* features two narrators, each of whom serves to communicate one of two intertwining narratives about oil’s discovery in the region. The first narrator performs the part of a local, hard-

working farmer, who speaks with a slightly regional accent and uses first-person statements to describe his “little market town of Leduc.” In his portions of the film, he describes the coming of the oilmen and the positive improvements oil development had on his farming community. Paired with his testimony are pastoral images of rural Canada and small-scale family agriculture, in which farmers are shown still harvesting wheat by horse-drawn wagon. “Signs of the new crop are all around,” the farmer states as the film depicts an oil well logo on a sign for a local café. Services, such as the electrical grid to more remote towns, are shown to be expanding, and new suburban communities are “mushrooming” up in nearby oil towns. Such positive sides of oil development have the potential to benefit agrarian communities in the wheat fields too, the farmer asserts. More oil means more fuel for farmers, linking the expansion of agribusiness in the West to machines and technologies dependent upon petroleum.

The second speaker imitates a more typical newsreel or documentary narrator, recounting the history of exploratory drilling and pipeline construction in a brisk, authoritative tone. He provides the film’s exposition, explaining how drilling works through animations, how oil development facilitates the expansion and modernization of roads and industry technologies, and how workers install pipelines across the countryside without disturbing local farmers. By switching between the two narratives and the two voices, the film weaves together an imaginary of the local with that of industry, to create an idealized portrait of Western Canada in which both agriculture and fossil fuels can co-exist. The film’s final montage summarizes this portrait by transposing iconography of the wheat harvest to represent oil. Following several shots of oil derricks punctuating tall fields of grain, a series of quick shots of wheat being rapidly thrashed and transported on grain belt conveyors are juxtaposed with shots of dark crude being sprayed into retaining ponds. A close-up of kernels of wheat pooling is similarly paired with a close-up of petroleum gushing from an open pipe. Positioned visually and narratively as “another harvest,” oil is situated in Alberta’s landscape as merely one of several fuels to be cultivated by industrious men.

*Underground East* (1953) moves farther afield from the specifically Western industries of wheat and ranching, but it, too, remains invested in developing a visual language for oil by comparing it to other key resource industries. In Imperial’s 1953 film, petroleum is cast as the most recent iteration of Canada’s staples economy in an appropriation of Harold A. Innis’ influential staples thesis, which he first laid out in *The Fur Trade in Canada* in 1956. Innis (1999) contends that Canadian economic development was historically shaped by trade in raw materials, first with industrialized Europe and then with the United States. This trade in highly valuable staples structured Canada’s economy, both prior to and following Confederation, resulting in the transportation of wealth from its sites of extraction in the margins to the centre for export (Innis, 1999). Raw materials such as fur, timber, fish, and coal were trapped, captured, or extracted from Canadian environments and then shipped abroad as “staples” to be manufactured in metropolitan centres. Such staples had to be easily portable, light, and transferrable over “long distances” and be durable for the long periods required by trade networks at the time. To make the trade networks profitable and reduce overhead for those involved, these staples also had to be in high demand, such as luxury

goods, which would be sold in metropolitan centres. Innis writes: “Goods were produced as rapidly as possible to be sold at the most advantageous price in the home market to purchase other goods essential to the maintenance and improvement of [settlers’] current standard of living” (1999, p. 384). Both Great Britain and the United States—and particularly the United States by the nineteenth century with “the disappearance of free land, the decline of natural resources, and the demand for new industrial materials”—had to “rely on outside areas” (pp. 385–386) like Canada to secure raw materials. Innis critiques Canada’s dependence on foreign markets for its economic development, arguing that Canada is rendered an economic margin for foreign imperial forces. As a margin, the country produces staples and exports them to the centre, which in exchange ships finished products and manufactured goods for purchase back to Canadian markets.

*Underground East* (1953), produced by Imperial in connection with the Interprovincial Pipe Line Company, documents the construction of what was the longest pipeline in the world at the time, stretching 1,129 miles from Edmonton, Alberta, to Superior, Wisconsin, to transport crude oil to east coast Canadian refineries. The pipeline in question was initially constructed in the summer of 1950. Three years later, the Interprovincial Pipe Line Company expanded it to traverse an additional 643 miles to Sarnia, Ontario, where tankers then transported the Western crude across the Great Lakes. The film comprises documentary footage of the pipeline’s construction from both 1950 and 1953, and presents the newly expanded west-east pipeline as a “milestone in the nation’s progress” (in the narrator’s own words).<sup>4</sup> Describing Canada as an “important oil-producing nation” in light of the discovery of vast crude reserves at Leduc, *Underground East* seeks to both document the process of the pipeline construction and rhetorically situate it in relation to pre-existing regional staple economies from across Canada. Over the course of the narrative, *Underground East* shows how workers constructed the pipeline, to connect Alberta’s oil fields to refineries in southern Ontario, emphasizing the steep environmental challenges the workers faced along the way: from laying pipe across frozen rivers to constructing bridges over deep ravines. It concludes with footage of two public ceremonies marking the pipeline’s completion: the first in Edmonton, with Alberta premier Ernest Manning opening a valve to release the flow of oil east, and the second in Sarnia, featuring Ontario premier Leslie Frost greeting the arrival of the *Imperial Leduc* tanker on its maiden voyage porting Alberta crude, billed as “the world’s largest freshwater tanker” by the *Imperial Oil Review* (1951, p. 4).

The opening sequence of *Underground East* depicts an animation of two oil derricks, over which scrolls a celebratory text, introducing the Interprovincial Pipe Line and making a claim for its technological triumphs and singular importance as a “record” of “Canadian achievement.” By describing the pipeline as a “milestone in the nation’s progress,” Imperial seeks to locate this infrastructural project within national narratives of economic and technological progress from the onset. This point is reiterated in the following colourful sequence, which commences with a close-up of two fishermen scooping sardines and other baitfish from a bulging net suspended from the side of their boat. In the quick subsequent montage, a man in a vibrant red coat

stacks pine logs in a pile on the edge of a snowy forest, a farmer forks wheat onto a threshing belt under a cerulean sky, a miner grimy with coal dust beneath his hard hat drills deep underground, and two roughnecks carefully attach another length of pipe to their drill. The montage ends with a long shot of a derrick whose vertical thrust is paralleled by heavy black plumes of smoke billowing up from a nearby gas flare on the flat prairie. Over these shots the narrator intones: "The story of Canada is the story of resources. Search, discovery, development. And the newest resource is oil." Petroleum, it is made clear, is the most recent discovery to be made profitable in the country's long history of commercial resource developments.

Significantly, coal, wheat, timber, and fish are all examples of staples cited by Innis in his economic histories of Canada. Although Innis did not specifically write about the Western petroleum boom following Leduc (in fact, he passed away one year prior to the release of *Underground East*), by situating oil in relation to these previous industries, the films seeks to establish a rhetorical continuity between these resource industries—and, by extension, Imperial's commercial developments in Alberta. Part of this continuity established in this opening sequence, but it can also be read into the narrative's emphasis on the successful collapsing of distance enabled by the pipeline, which was capable of transporting crude oil to its destination in 26 days. This technological feat could be seen to echo the triumph of the CPR, as a transportation infrastructure and communication technology. Both the transportation infrastructure of the pipeline and crude oil as Canada's next fuel staple are presented as components of Canada's future staple economies.

Later in the film, Innis' notion of a staples economy is once again taken up, again in nationalist terms. Alberta oil, the film claims, has the potential to facilitate Canada's energy sovereignty from American economic imperialism. Paraphrasing Premier Frost's speech, the narrator declares: "When the western crude arrived ... the new resource had brought sweeping savings to the Prairies and to the country as a whole." With savings of "hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars no longer spent on imported crude," Leduc oil, and thereby Imperial Oil, can work to keep Canadians' dollars within the country and out of American markets. In effect, such rhetoric positions oil as a solution to the problem of Canada's dependence on American markets as outlined by Innis.

Throughout all three films, petroleum is represented as a new force in the region, yet one that does not destabilize pre-existing farming practices. However, if we inquire into the specific land-use practices of each industry, the potential implications of these overlapping resource geographies that the films attempt to paper over become more visible. Historically, ranchers in Alberta's foothills faced a variety of pressures from agricultural lobbies, resulting in land lease battles in the early twentieth century between ranchers and government bodies and federal edicts around farmers' leaseholds (Foran, 2004). Exploratory drilling in Turner Valley since the 1910s, land speculation following the assorted boom-and-bust cycles, and the sea change that the Leduc strike represented could only exacerbate previous tensions in the region around land-use practices. Legal distinctions between the ownership of surface rights and mineral rights in Alberta, for instance, served to slice property ownership and leasing rights into two strata, one at the surface of the land and the other below (see Alberta Energy, 2017).

Such complications, while not explicitly referenced in these films, can be inferred in scenes depicting the consultation process Imperial had to undertake with landowners when proposed pipelines would traverse private properties.

In *Underground East* (1953) for example, the route of the Interprovincial Pipe Line stretched from the Prairies to the American Great Lakes region. All civilian landowners whose properties lay across the proposed path, the film takes pains to point out, were consulted and permissions secured prior to the laying of the pipeline. Company representatives are depicted conversing with representative farmers in both Imperial film productions. Potential conflicts over pipeline rights-of-way across farmers' fields, let alone the potential environmental risks to crops posed by pipeline leakages or soil contamination, are all easily glossed over. Instead, as we are told in *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), farmers cultivating lands around Leduc were compensated for the pipeline's right-of-way across their fields and any inadvertent "loss of crops." The social or environmental consequences posed by other oil infrastructures to farmers, ranchers, and civilian landowners depicted in these films (refineries, tanker shipping routes) are also carefully avoided. Given that many Western farmers who held surface rights might not have also held the mineral rights that governed mineral substances found on and under a property (including petroleum and natural gas reserves), such evasions of the real-world complexities of land use around different resource industries serve to re-affirm the myth of co-existence that these oil-infused texts sought to promote to viewers at home and abroad.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the National Film Board and Imperial Oil used nontheatrical cinema to portray commercial oil exploration, Western oil developments, and pipeline construction as important mechanisms for Canadian development. *The Story of Oil* (1946), *A Mile Below the Wheat* (1949), and *Underground East* (1953) are examples of a budding genre of nontheatrical filmmaking in Canada that followed the excavation of petroleum in Leduc and other parts of southern Alberta: the oil film. As shown in this article, these private- and public-sector productions proposed a number of analogies between oil and other resource industries in Western Canada—from cattle ranching to wheat agriculture to the notion of a staples economy itself—through various formal and narrative strategies. These films serve as representative examples of how specific institutions, including petroleum companies and the Canadian government, were still exploring and experimenting with how to visually depict this emerging energy sector. Such cinematic comparisons between fuel industries, and the insertion of oil into pre-existing visual imaginaries of Western Canada, can be seen to legitimize the presence of commercial oil developments on landscapes that were already being used and cultivated for other purposes. In presenting a mythological reworking of "on the ground" relations between oilmen and Western farmers, between Big Oil and Big Agriculture, these petro-films disavowed the lived complexities and sometimes painful realities of this emerging industry.

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## Notes

1. The Imperial Oil Company, which was founded in London, Ontario, in 1880, has a long history of oil and gas operations in Canada. This history includes the extraction and refining of crude oil to produce a range of petroleum-based lubricants and other products, and the transportation of these products to domestic and international markets. By the 1890s, Imperial had emerged as the leading player in Canada's oil industry; its corporate headquarters relocated to Toronto, Ontario, in 1916. By 1920, Imperial refineries processed 91 percent of the country's crude oil (Penfold, 2016). Today, Imperial is headquartered in Calgary, Alberta, and continues to be one of the country's largest refiners of petroleum products. For an online timeline of the corporation's activities, see Imperial Oil Limited (2017).
2. Crawley Films Limited, an Ottawa-based private production company, was one of the few independent Canadian companies to operate in parallel with the National Film Board. The company was co-founded by filmmakers Judith Crawley and Frank "Budge" R. Crawley in 1939 (Forrester, 1982). Until its closure in 1989, Crawley Films produced about 5,000 films in both French and English, ranging from documentaries to features to corporate and government industrial films (Varga, 2015). Crawley Films' involvement with Imperial Oil dates back to the Crawleys' production of *The Loon's Necklace* (Crawley & Crawley, 1948), a short animated picture derived from a First Nations legend about the loon, which Imperial Oil purchased for educational distribution.
3. For an overview of nontheatrical filmmaking in Canada prior to the establishment of the National Film Board in 1939, see Morris (1992).
4. Industrial films were not the only industry mouthpieces for Imperial Oil at the time. The company also published the *Imperial Oil Review*, an industry magazine. The August 1951 issue also covered the shipment of Western crude to Ontario refineries. In one of the articles, the president of Imperial Oil, G.L. Stewart, is quoted similarly affirming the importance of the Interprovincial pipeline to Canada's national development. Stewart contends that the growth of the country's oil industry (steered by Imperial Oil, of course) will benefit the "whole Canadian economy" by stimulating further development across secondary industries; in short, "the economy is further strengthened by the expanded use of our natural resources" (quoted in *Imperial Oil Review*, 1951, p. 5). While reading these industrial films in tandem with Imperial's other sponsored productions exceeds the scope of this article, the resonant language between *Underground East* (1953) and the *Review's* coverage of the same events underlines the significance and consistency of the corporate message across different media.

## Filmography

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- Battle for oil (La Bataille du pétrole)*. (1942). [Documentary]. Legg, Stuart (Director). Produced by the National Film Board of Canada. Item 17949, acc. no. 1973-0132. National Film Board of Canada/Office national du film du Canada: Nitrate fonds, Library and Archives Canada.
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*The story of oil* [Nontheatrical film]. (1946). Director uncredited. Producer Guy Glover. Produced by National Film Board of Canada. Item 1190 acc. no. 1985-0292. National Film Board of Canada/Office national du film du Canada: 1982-1985 fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

*Underground east* [Nontheatrical film]. (1953). Director uncredited. Photography by Gerry Moses. Sponsored by Imperial Oil. Produced by Interprovincial Pipe Line Company & Crawley Films.

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