Our last hours
Northern densities:  
A note on the Canadian Underground.  
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In the 1950s, Canada had developed into disparate communities across varied geographies, some on water, others deeply landlocked, of cities, towns, plains unspoiled by human settlement, and cruel, inhospitable territories. It was a nation of coexisting visions and identities, divided in the public consciousness by language and custom. Like America, it was built through Europe's colonial interest in a new world vaguely realizing westward. It had come to mirror American regionalism inasmuch as its Pacific edge eventually met with Asian cultural influence, to the East, its political centre, a region of big cities and dense forests. In between lay a great plain, more a tundra than the Midwest, stretching north to the Arctic, but that tundra was rich with its own regional cultures, marked by labour politics, agriculture and mining. The Canadian occupied the territory between British and American claims and culture. Canada's moral and political philosophies would attempt to explain or reconcile this crisis of community, but its art would remain a product of the distances. Artistic communities would form in provincial towns and in the bohemian neighborhoods in cities, all in the shadow of a great wilderness.

It seems fitting, then, that from so vast a country, Canada's underground cinema would have several birthplaces. Its earliest manifestations were in the animation department of the National Film Board, a federal institution mandated to create wartime propaganda in support of national communications services. What distinguished the NFB from other organizations of its kind was its remarkable facility for advancing the rhetoric of cinema, documentary or otherwise, and by this gift, it received international recognition. From its recesses, its staff and producers often took unusual risks that were not in keeping with the board's assigned mission. There are two figures upon whom they staked such risks in their first decades: a Scottish abstract animator, Norman McLaren, and the collagist Arthur Lipsett. McLaren's films at the NFB, beginning in the 1940s, quickly proved to be little risk at all — works of fascination and enchantment that engaged simple pleasures of light and sound, and soon these works came to serve as the prominent counterpoint to the 'class picture' of Canadian society that was emerging from the NFB's documentary units. Lipsett, a Montreal art student who began making films in the early 1960s, would have a more difficult time — and would produce far more challenging work — through his entanglements with producers who wanted his films to have clearly elucidated meanings. The NFB, with its mission equal parts humanitarian and corporatist, had no patience for Lipsett, whose work had visionary, mystical, macabre edges too sharp in wit for the staff, who wished for didactic films. His producers wished for didacticism, and received in turn ambiguous arcs-of-energies, increasingly tuned to the wavelength of late modern life, its broken tongues, ears, eyes. This relationship collapsed over time, with NFB staff sabotaging and disowing Lipsett for failing, in their view, to support the company mandate, however, Lipsett would be championed internationally as one of Canada's essential contributions to the international
underground cinema movement, and within Canada, the heartbreaking circumstances of his expulsion were mythologized. The NFB would gloss over the details, blaming Lipsett's decline on his personal demons, and continuing to neglect his masterful final NFB film, N-Zone (1970).

In the 1960s, in Toronto and London, two cities of the Southern Ontario region, visual artists began to make films. In both cities, these films sprung up as part of a Neo-Dada movement, dominated by painters, who would show their first films in galleries and in salon settings. Makers included Joyce Wieland, Michael Snow, Greg Curnoe, and Graham Coughtry, among others. Of these artists, Snow, Wieland, and Jack Chambers, who had recently returned after a decade of living in Spain, began to undertake more substantial film projects that gained the attention of the American filmmaker, critic and poet Jonas Mekas. Mekas wrote of their efforts that the Canadian film was distinguished by "a finer density" than other cinemas in the international new cinema, assigning to it qualities of material engagement and perceptual difficulty of uniquely intense conviction. Elsewhere in Ontario, a dispersed movement of independent filmmakers gained traction and focus. Some had discovered artistic cinema through the American independent film, the Italian neorealist film, the French New Wave. Others had discovered more vanguard forms in art galleries and screening societies in big cities or on campuses. The most visible and vocal among those pursuing underground filmmaking was John Hofsess of Hamilton, whose psychotherapeutic series Palace of Pleasure (1966/67) travelled widely in North America and Europe, and planted the seeds for a Canadian underground film network, which would eventually become the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. On the other side of the country, in Vancouver, the influence of expanded cinema, among other post-modern ambitions, had led to the formation of an artists' collective, Intermedia, around which a lively group of filmmakers and multimedia artists, including Sam Perry, David Rimmer, Gary Lee Nova, and Al Razutis would develop a West Coast underground film.

In the late 1960s, Snow, Wieland, and Chambers, would each make major works that would define the Canadian experimental film. Joyce Wieland's Reason Over Passion (1968) captured a journey from the east to west coast, by car and train, with the grim spectre of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau looming large in its vision of a nation in crisis, at its centenary. Jack Chambers' The Hart of London (1969) was an autobiography of Chambers and a chronicle of his hometown of London, Ontario, the region becoming indivisible from the man and his gathering traits - as an artist, a father, and a vessel of humanist outrage. Michael Snow's La region centrale (1971) saw as a globe sees: an unmanned camera mounted on an automated arm tilts, pans, and spins in 360-degree movements, forming a post-Sputnik vision of the last wilderness. These three works gave an ultimate expression to primary Canadian themes, of autobiography, landscape, and material self-consciousness. After a long period of dispersed activity, a school of filmmaking was forming as the Canadian vanguard.

Through the course of the 1970s, the Toronto scene witnessed collisions of late modern, post-modern, and punk filmmaking styles all under the umbrella of the underground. The declarations in these films varied as widely as what they rejected — romanticism, structuralism, permanence, or improvisation. Prominent filmmakers of this era include Keith Lock, whose film Everything Everywhere Again Alive (1974/75) remains one of Canada's most
deeply felt portraits of nature and community; brothers Jim and Davis Anderson, whose separate film practices accommodated animation, documentary, and structuralist experimentation; Anna Gronau, whose films embraced a critical self-consciousness; and Ross McLaren, who in his role as a teacher at the Ontario College of Art mentored many underground filmmakers. In the Escarpment region, under the influence of filmmaker and teacher Rick Hancock, a number of filmmakers of vastly differing styles emerged not long after, including Philip Hoffman, whose work would gradually become strongly associated with the hand-processed autobiography; Carl Brown, whose films embraced abstraction as a force of violent, romantic expression; and Michael Hoolboom, who fast assembled the perspective of a defiant outsider, and whose films often joined material expression with queer politics and critical inquiry. A few other remarkable filmmakers emerged in these years, for example, Andrew Lugg, director of Black Forest Trading Post (1976), and Keewatin Dewdney, who made six remarkable films (above all The Maltese Cross Movement, 1967, and Wildwood Flower, 1971) before devoting himself to mathematics and environmental preservation.

A few figures achieved remarkable distinctions in this era: R. Bruce Elder began to make films in the 1970s, and by the early 1980s, he had emerged as the major voice of Canada's second wave of experimental filmmaking. Elder, a professor at Ryerson University and Canada's lone epic-maker and primary theorist for its vanguard cinema, was a divisive figure whose wide-ranging, fiercely modern intellectual and aesthetic pursuits often placed him out of step with his colleagues. Elder's work as a critic of Canadian art culminated in the first and, to date, most comprehensive and rigorous monographic assessment of Canadian cinema, Image and Identity (1988), and alongside this, he assembled an epic film cycle, The Book of All the Dead, with prominent debts to Dante Alighieri and Ezra Pound, running 36 hours in length. Elder's work persisted after The Book of All the Dead was finished in 1994, beginning again with a new cycle, The Book of Praise, which has continued unabated in the two decades since. Richard Kerr, who along with Brown, Hoffman, and Hoolboom, had studied with Rick Hancock at Sheridan College, was a maker of diaristic and centrifugal films. Kerr had, by the 1980s, begun a series of films confronting text, myth, and vision, often setting his sights on Americana from the distinct vantage point of the Canadian outsider, in his approach to Ernest Hemingway in On Land Over Water, and the apocalyptic overtones of The Last Days of Contrition and Cruel Rhythm. In more recent years, Kerr has balanced a series of films and videos with film weavings, in which strips of found film cross suspended over lightboxes, creating patterns of form and colour. Barbara Sternberg emerged in the late 1970s as a maker of films that married formal and critical inquiry, exploring social issues through the universal aspects of perception that the medium suggested, of vision, sound, and the illusion of tactility, evident in films such as Opus 40 (1979) and A Trilogy (1985). Along with this, she was a community builder, writing a column on experimental film for the magazine Cinema Canada and serving as a board or staff member in Canadian media arts organizations such as the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and the Pleasure Dome screening collective.

As the 1980s wore into the '90s, the once-rigid line between video art and underground film became more porous, with artists such as Sternberg and Hoolboom moving fluidly between the two. Throughout the 1990s, the
legacy of the Canadian underground was furthered by the emergence of artists such as Louise Bourque, Steven Woloshen, and John Price, in whose films the themes of splintered, alchemical vision and autobiographical impulse extended from their immediate predecessors. By the twenty-first century, a few artists had established themselves as a new generation of Canadian underground filmmaker — Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Christina Battle, Amanda Dawn Christie — in whose work the traditions of video art and underground film became even further enmeshed. The impulse toward globalization, and the decline of Canadian nationalism, changed the course of the Canadian underground, which in the 2010s has become less concerned with national or local politics, nor with the imposition of wilderness, nor with that fine density, that cultivated difficulty that Mekas found in it. Nevertheless, from the emerging crop of filmmakers who carry on the tradition of the Canadian underground, there are impulses that endure, albeit nearer to the universal: the untethered eye of the camera, the disfiguring collage of chemistry, the charting of intimate experience, and occasionally, a glimpse of the vast expanse that spreads out A Mari Usque Ad Mare, from sea to sea.