film as artifact
the city (1939)

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Although a great deal has been written about the use of film as historical evidence, scholars still have much to explore in the relationship of the medium to patterns of American culture. Too often historians, with their emphasis on what happened in the past, have consigned the film to a supplemental role in documenting the progression of important events. Film specialists, on the other hand, have tended to minimize consideration of the complex historical circumstances which help shape both film content and technique. Like any other survival from the past—a manuscript, a piece of pottery or a building—film conveys a message to the historian, but one which necessitates careful interpretation both of the medium itself and its context. American studies, with its established concern for the inter-relationship of any artistic medium with the historical circumstances out of which it emerged, should take the lead in filling this void in film scholarship.

Circumstances surrounding the appearance of *The City*—at the confluence of important new traditions in American documentary film and urban theory—

FIGURE ONE (above): One of many shots of prohibitory signs. FIGURE TWO (below): Children brought up in slums are contrasted to children in the new garden cities (see Figure Five, page 79). The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, 21 W. 53rd Street, New York City.

provide an excellent opportunity to illustrate the importance of film as an historical artifact. Typically, published references to the film, including the most significant ones in Richard Barsam's *Nonfiction Film* and Mel Scott's *American City Planning*,[1] examine only the barest details of the relation between film technique and urban planning. By probing the interactions of the planners' theories and film makers' techniques, however, we can explore through *The City* the question of how ideas influence the structuring of a film and how, in turn, the surviving artifact can serve as an indicator of past social values, outlook and perception.

The advent of the depression, with its visible signs of economic and social collapse in cities, encouraged the Roosevelt Administration to launch the country's first national study of urban life. With this mandate, in 1937 the Committee on Urbanism issued its first report, *Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy*. A year later, Louis Wirth drew on his contribution to the report to publish his highly influential essay, "Urbanism as a Way of Life." In the same year, Lewis Mumford published his seminal urban study, *The Culture of Cities*.

Contributors to these works agreed that the precarious urban condition demanded unprecedented efforts to rouse public opinion for widespread civic and social reform. Yet despite achieving ultimate historical recognition, these appeals had limited immediate impact. Beyond generating a modest amount of editorial opinion, the Committee on Urbanism report, as Mark Gelfand points out, failed to gain the attention of either President Roosevelt or Congress.[2] Although Wirth took an active role in advocating urban reforms at planning conferences, his growing reputation was nonetheless largely confined to academic circles. Even though *The Culture of Cities* helped propel Mumford to the cover of *Time*, he later related his disappointment that "despite a certain measure of popular success, the book exerted little influence in the United States."[3]

It was scarcely surprising, then, that a group of urban critics would seize on the emerging documentary form as a vehicle for generating public support for their programs. The English already had demonstrated the ability to influence public opinion through film under the leadership of John Grierson. Pare Lorentz's films, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937) had proved the receptiveness of an American audience. As Richard Griffith wrote in 1938:

> The nation-wide success of Lorentz's two government films has put documentary on the map with a flourish. Never before have pictures dealing with social problems captured the attention of an audience which includes all levels of American opinion. And this popularity, as widespread as it is unprecedented, has raised high hopes among those who have for years wanted to enlist the films as an instrument for social education. Educators and publicists everywhere

72

are hailing documentary as a vivid, urgent method for developing the social attitudes of masses of people, for reconditioning their civic thinking.[4]

It remained only for the architect and community planner Clarence Stein to forge the link between film makers and urbanologists.

In 1938, Stein established a non-profit corporation, Civic Films, within the American Institute of Planners, to produce a film on the urban condition for maximum exposure at the New York World's Fair of 1939. He went through his brother-in-law, Arthur Mayer, to enlist as producer Ralph Steiner, who, along with Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, had photographed Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. They secured an eleven page working outline for the film from Lorentz, which was then built on by Henwar Rodakiewicz, who had come to their attention as the writer for Strand's *The Wave* (1935). Rodakiewicz then enlisted Lewis Mumford to write the commentary.

Not surprisingly, once again, the film sponsors chose to promote the founding of planned "garden cities" as their cause. Stein had built his reputation on the private development of these new towns at Sunnyside Gardens, Long Island and Radburn, New Jersey. Although he served only as a consultant to the Resettlement Administration's program to finance such towns publicly during the New Deal, his timely intervention in the planning process with its director, Rexford G. Tugwell, helped set the program on course.[5] The extensive public criticism of this aspect of Tugwell's program may possibly have influenced Stein to turn to film to publicize the new town ideal. At any rate, his intentions to promote the idea were clear as he gathered together veterans of town planning to promote the film. Three of the six board members of Civic Films— Robert Kohn, Tracy Augur and Frederick Ackerman—had joined Stein and Mumford as members of the small but influential Regional Plan Association of America (RPAA) to promote the development of garden cities in the 1920s. At one time Stein's architectural associate, Kohn took a leadership role in planned government housing, first as director of the U.S. Shipping Board's housing program during World War I and then as director of the housing division of the Public Works Administration in 1933 and 1934. Ackerman worked under Kohn at the Shipping Board, subsequently serving as a town planner for both Sunnyside Gardens and Radburn. Best known in the 1930s as chief town planner for the Tennessee Valley Authority, Augur shared an enthusiasm for Radburn as a possible model for the nation.[6]

The film, then, can be viewed in large part as a propaganda piece for the garden city idea. As the scene shifts from the idyllic setting of a New England village through a grimy industrial town, to the huge metropolis and back to the ideal of the garden city, a solution emerges through the juxtaposition of visual images. The planning ideals of restoring to modern urban life the healthy environment, sociability and

73

sense of community once associated with the New England village are realized in the new towns. For every disharmony of the fragmented, chaotic city, the new town offers order, peace and happiness, factors which are underscored by numerous cinematic techniques. As the scene shifts from the New England village to the industrial town, the music shifts from harmony to dissonance, the film texture darkens, and the measured pace of the opening sequence adopts the frenzy of its urban subject matter. After sequences on the metropolis and an endless week-end traffic tie-up in the country, the mood and imagery shift back to the opening scenes. The restoration of a healthy living environment is signalled by dispensing shadows, reviving musical harmony and a return to the even pacing of the opening sequence. The camera hammers home the contrasts in the closing minutes through alternating dissolves from two children's paintings—one of the squalid city, the other of the planned community. The narrator underscores the point, saying: "You take your choice. Each one is real. Each one is possible. Shall we sink deeper, deeper in old grooves . . . or have we vision and courage? Shall we build and rebuild our cities?"

On the level of communicating a reform message, the collaboration between planners and film makers appears to have been felicitous, providing historians interested in the sequence of events with a powerful illustration of an important movement in city planning. The film is important at another level, however, in offering a creative treatment of the urban environment, one which was achieved only through considerable conflict between the film makers and their sponsors.

Lewis Mumford originally intended to do an outline for the film, but when he was called away to the West coast and Hawaii, the responsibility passed to Lorentz. The planners submitted what Ralph Steiner described as "two hundred pounds" of material for Lorentz to review, much of which undoubtedly stressed the garden city programs in which the planners were involved. Lorentz was slow to do the work, however, and when he ultimately turned out the outline—under Steiner's prodding after a few days of intensive work—it seems unlikely he would have had the time to pore over those materials.[7] More likely, he was influenced in adopting the new town solution through his association with Rex Tugwell, whose own debt to the planners was also indirect.[8]

FIGURES THREE AND FOUR: Workers diminished by machines; craftsmen in harmony with tools and nature. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.
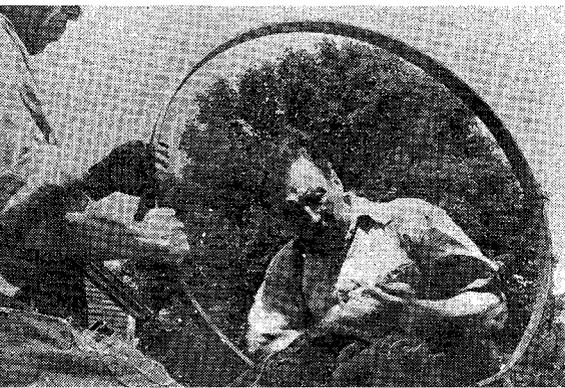
Whatever the immediate source of inspiration, Lorentz's scenario closely paralleled the pattern of his earlier films, combining a creative, even poetic treatment of a social problem, with a considerably more perfunctory treatment of a government solution.[9] Both elements survived to set the framework for the film without, however, resolving the built-in conflict between social theory and artistic integrity.

There is no doubt that the film makers, like the planners, viewed themselves as reformers. In a 1975 interview with me, Willard Van Dyke described *The City* as "the kind of film that could only be made by young hopeful artists who still felt that their art could make a difference."[10] Still, he rejected using the artistic medium for narrowly reformist purposes, as he noted in explaining his differences with John Grierson in a 1973 interview at the Center for Media Study at SUNY, Buffalo:

> He had a kind of contempt for art. He was a propagandist, and I thought that the two worked together. I thought there was no reason in the world not to have art in propaganda. Certainly I was interested in social change, but I was also interested in the aesthetics of my medium, and the two of them were good together, but he didn't agree.[11]

Most clearly at issue during the production of *The City* was the pressure from Clarence Stein and his colleagues to dominate the film with its garden city solution. Ultimately, the final, reform sequence dragged out a disproportionate 17 of the 44 minutes of the film, which later prompted Van Dyke, who shot most of the footage in Greenbelt, Maryland, to say: "It was never conceived of that way at all. We had planned it to be very short. When the city planners said, 'Oh, come on, you've had your fun, it is our time to say what we really want. You have to spell it out.' "[12] According to Ralph Steiner, who never shared the planners' faith in garden cities, the subject matter proved a cinematic nightmare:

> The architects' and city planners' solution was of an impossible dullness—no grace—more jails without locks. They had not learned what the New Englander (first sequence) had in his bones when he built his towns—harmony, grace, loveliness. . . . I'm more emotional than Willard, and I'd have rebelled at shooting those modern slums. What the city planners built resulted from all head and no heart and no eye. Stingy minds creating stingy houses.[13]

Closely associated with the problems of spelling out the reform solution was Mumford's commentary, which Steiner claims was "forced" on the producers by Stein's committee with unhappy results: ". . . when we first read Mumford's written commentary, we *all* thought it was terrible. Perhaps correct from a city-planning point of view and philosophically, but mushy and sententious in the extreme. I still shudder, after all these years, at some of the unnecessary 'on-the-nose-ness' and goo-iness."[14]

Henwar Rodakiewicz probably shared some of Steiner's uneasiness with the Mumford commentary. In a set of notes compiled in preparation

for the film recently published in Lewis Jacobs' *The Movies as Medium*, Rodakiewicz expressed his intention, in line with the original Lorentz outline, to minimize all commentary, letting the sights and sounds of the city supported by Aaron Copland's musical orchestration speak for themselves. The narrator, he believed, should be reserved for the first and final sequences, so that his voice will, in his words, "always represent the 'good' whether the past, present or future." He was particularly anxious to exercise this restraint in the industrial sequence, writing:

> Narrative is unnecessary, for the images are brutally vivid. Any words that could be said . . . would surely distort the purpose of this sequence, for, because of the juxtaposition and contrast of words and picture, they would inevitably resolve themselves into a cynical and one-sided commentary, which is neither a completely true representation of the scene nor our aim in this sequence. So music is all that is needed on the sound track. The pictures will speak for themselves and tell their story far more vividly and honestly.[15]

In the final film version, the shift in scenes from the New England village to the industrial city takes place through the technique of a dissolve from the fire of the blacksmith's anvil to the molten fires of red-hot Bessemer steel. In line with Rodakiewicz's goal, much of the burden of transition is carried by sight and sound. As he described it, "music is born of the anvil beats—and as the camera moves closer and closer to the red-hot iron, the music becomes more intense and ringing."[16] To this is added, however, what would have to be considered, in Marshall McLuhan's terms, Mumford's overheated commentary:

> Forget the quiet cities. Open the throttle. All aboard, the promised land. Pillars of smoke by day, pillars of fire by night, pillars of progress, machines to make machines, production to expand production. . . . There are prisons where a guy sent up for crime can get a better place to live than we can give our children.

Even though the speeded-up pace of the narration fits the theme of the sequence—much in line with Dos Passos' technique of running words together in *U.S.A.* to establish a tone of mechanization—we have the feeling that such comments were gratuitous according to Rodakiewicz's standards. The same problem arises at the conclusion where, according to a forthcoming study by William Alexander, Rodakiewicz's hope to incorporate a number of conflicting points of view in the form of different indigenous voices was overruled by Stein's committee in favor of the "on-the-nose-ness" approach ultimately retained.

At the heart of the conflict between planners and film makers lay the question of tone. The film makers sought to bring their subject alive, not the least through the use of humor. From the outset, Lorentz envisioned the scenes of weekend traffic as a kind of "Laurel and Hardy"

sequence which could provide comic relief from the grim facts of urban living. The preceding metropolitan scenes were full of humor, too, as the camera focused on hapless pedestrians trying to cross in the middle of the street, frustrated passengers helplessly witnessing the grind of a taxi meter, and the painful anonymity of lunch counter dining. Perhaps because the scenes of the pulsating city had more verve than the camera could ever give the new town, some of the planners objected to such scenes, charging that the film makers had "taken a serious subject and made fun of it." Their insistence on projecting their own message ultimately drove the film makers to subterfuge, as Ralph Steiner revealed in a 1973 interview at SUNY, Buffalo: "The clients wanted to know, 'what are you doing, what are you doing,' and we didn't want to show them, so we would just take anything and put it together all mixed up and just show them shots, so they couldn't see sequences or anything. Sometimes we'd take apart the work print and mix it all up and then put it back again."[17]

One conclusion might be that theorists do not make good films. Steiner reiterated this belief time and again in his Buffalo interview, as he emphasized that the only way to make films was to learn by making mistakes, not by over-intellectualizing. He made this point again in denying the capacity of film to present complex ideas:

> Maybe the historian (like Mumford) can, but the film maker simply rubs his nose in hard visual facts. Most of the visuals come out of nose and eyes to reality and the lens to reality. If we had been the thinkers and sociologists we'd made a film that would have gone straight into the ash can—a dreary, dry thing. If I were selecting a film maker for a film on a like subject, I'd pick a man with an eye and heart and the breath of life in him any day over a film maker with a brilliant theoretical mind.[18]

Given the many reviews which praised above all else the human dimensions of urban life in the first four sequences,[19] Steiner's position would seem to have been vindicated. Yet the contribution Mumford made to the film should not be underestimated, for he must be credited with making of such scenes something more than random incidents. His role was to move the film from the level of mere entertainment to incisive public commentary, a point he suggested in describing his differences with Steiner and Rodakiewicz:

> They conceived of the film entirely in terms of pictorial shots with a minimum of explanation: the best parts of the film were those that were self-explanatory, because they dealt with the frustration and difficulties of living in the big city, or even attempting to leave it in search of recreation. All these scenes were well grasped by R. and handled with great gusto and skill. But the producer had no notion of what we sought to demonstrate; and as a result, every attempt to show better alternatives in planning and living

were commonplace, insipid, conventionally conceived, and entirely unconvincing. This is an old story in the drama; conflict and evil are much more exciting than an uneventful happy life.[20]

Despite complaining that his role had been reduced to a minimum, Mumford was nonetheless able to use the commentary to draw together what otherwise would have been lost thematic connections.

The many shots of children, for instance, provide important linkages from one sequence to the next. From the original scenario, it appears that Lorentz confined these images purely to a cinematic technique to achieve continuity, writing:

> From this point on, I feel the entire Green City should be a children's or a youngster's sequence. It may be theatrical hokum to show a happy child as a sign of happiness, but in this case I think we should do more than show one happy child. We started this picture with a boy on the green— we showed our children, finally, on city streets, we showed our children on the highway. Now, I think we are fully justified in saying that the city of the future is here. . . . All the other details of housing, of planning, of parks, of under- passes should be done with a series of children's activities; and they should be active as hell, and not just posed. Playing games—swimming—chasing one another—all these devices will give a visual lift to the picture. . . . I feel it should end with baby smiling, and rolling in sun, with longer shot of sun going down behind group of buildings with trees and green around them, having some basic design that will remind you of our prologue and New England village.[21]

Beyond the device of parallelism, the contrast between children in dangerous or forlorn urban circumstances and their luckier counterparts in the planned communities drew on a long tradition of reform journal- ism, associated most prominently with Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. What made those images more than just muckraking, however, was the commentary, which built on an ascendant neighborhood planning theory, endorsed by members of the RPAA, stressing the importance of a planned environment in the process of socialization.

Most closely associated with Clarence Arthur Perry, an informal RPAA member, neighborhood planning theory attempted to counter the fragmentation of urban life by emphasizing primary group relations along lines suggested by the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, especially the child's play group and the neighborhood community of elders.[22] Such theory, as Lewis Mumford later described it, stressed "the needs of families; particularly . . . the needs of mothers and children from the latter's infancy up to adolescence as well as upon the needs of all age groups for having access to certain common cultural facilities; the school, the library, the meeting hall, the cinema, the church."[23] The Greenbelt towns offered a particularly appropriate subject for the film, for it was
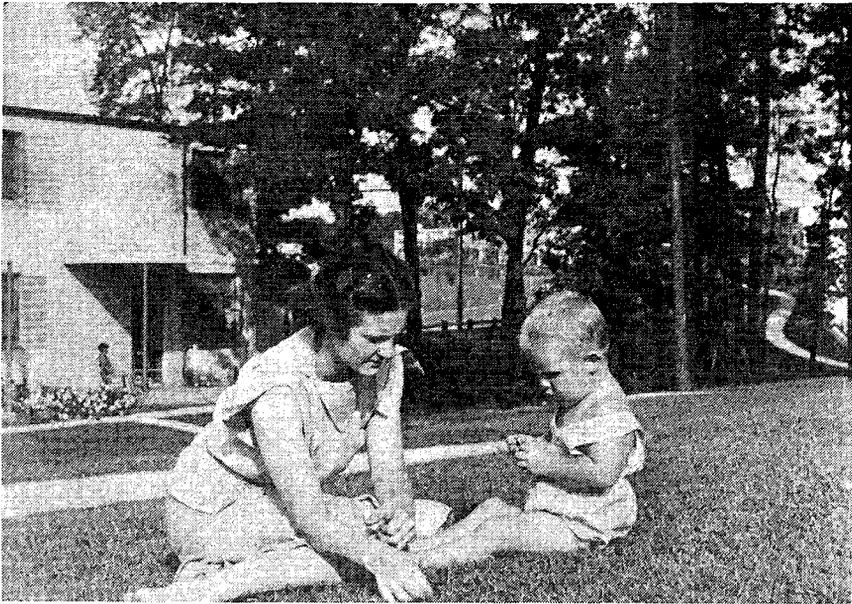
FIGURE FIVE: Children in a planned environment. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

there, as Clarence Stein explained, that Perry's neighborhood unit ideas were first self-consciously applied to the earlier models of Radburn and the English garden cities.[24] The juxtaposition of families served, then, not merely as a dramatic device, but as a theoretical foundation. Most critical, in light of the unimaginative portrayal of domesticity in the Greenbelt towns, was the commentator's assertion that:

> This is no suburb where the lucky people play at living in the country. This kind of city spells cooperation. Whenever doing things together means cheapness or efficiency or better living. Each house is grouped with other houses close to schools, the public meeting hall, the movies and the markets. Around these green communities a belt of public land preserves their shape forever.[25]

Closely associated with the desire to enhance neighborhood cooperation was the planners' attack on the anti-social consequences of the automobile. Lorentz's outline revealed his sympathy with the planners by depicting "the cultural life of the endless highway" with its "pitiful recreation camps ... junked cars; stupid garage facilities. . . ." Like Mumford, he saw the automobile as a symbol of modern urban culture, which could be contrasted to other transportation forms representative of different urban stages, notably the cart opening the New England sequence, the railroad which ushers in the industrial city, and the airplane which heralds the greenbelt towns in the final sequence.[26] But beyond this linking device, Lorentz did not spell out the means to tie the auto-

mobile to theory. In the film makers' hands, most traffic scenes are used for dramatic effect, particularly the final shot in the highway sequence of a car gratuitously plunging over a cliff. What saved such incidents from mere drama and put them in the form of social philosophy was the commentary in the final sequence which depicted both the internal network of roads and external parkways as the means to harness the automobile for social purposes.

In the end, much of *The City's* power derives from the fundamental goal behind the new planning ideas not merely to provide the good life in new towns, but to reorder existing urban forms out of the congested central cities into a regional framework of small urban nodes, each tied together by new forms of transportation and communication. This goal, which had achieved wide circulation in the previous decade through the writings of Stein, Mumford and their colleagues in the RPAA, especially Benton MacKaye,[27] achieved its most forceful expression in *The Culture of Cities*. Drawing from Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, Mumford argued that the life of cities followed the fate of living organisms, passing through a series of developmental stages marking the rise and fall of civilization. Rejecting, however, Spengler's conclusion that cultural organisms ultimately lead to extinction, Mumford claimed that "cities can take on new life by a transplantation of tissues from healthy communities in other regions and civilizations . . . while there is life, there is a possibility of countermovement, fresh growth."[28]

The parallel between *The City* and *The Culture of Cities* was so striking that one reputable film commentator, the Englishman Paul Rotha, claimed that the film was based on the book.[29] Despite Mumford's limited direct influence—he provided only the commentary after *The City* had been cut and edited—the film clearly parallels Mumford's description of the decline and rebirth of cities. The final section, in particular, abounds with the symbols of what he called the new "biotechnic" civilization. It appears no coincidence, for instance, that the crucial transition from the old to the new urban forms is made with the cut from the automobile's destruction to images of the Boulder Dam, power stations, an airplane and a modern highway. These are the signs of the new order where, as the narrator reports, "New cities are not allowed to grow and overcrowd beyond the size fit for living in. The new city is organized to make cooperation possible between machines and men. . . . The motor parkways weave together city and countryside. . . . Science takes new currents. We grapple with brute force and chaos. Who shall be master, things or men? At last men take command."[30]

Both film makers and planners thus made their own special contribution to *The City*. Their differences in perception produced a number of compromises which proved unsatisfactory to both groups of participants. Yet despite these differences they found an underlying point of unity which brought them close together on fundamentals. What gave the film

80

a consistent purpose was not the promotion of the greenbelt towns, which had practically run its course in the New Deal by 1939, but the redemption of cultural processes gone amuck. What the film makers seemed to sense was exactly what the theorists were writing with a passion, that the city was the chief agent shaping the culture
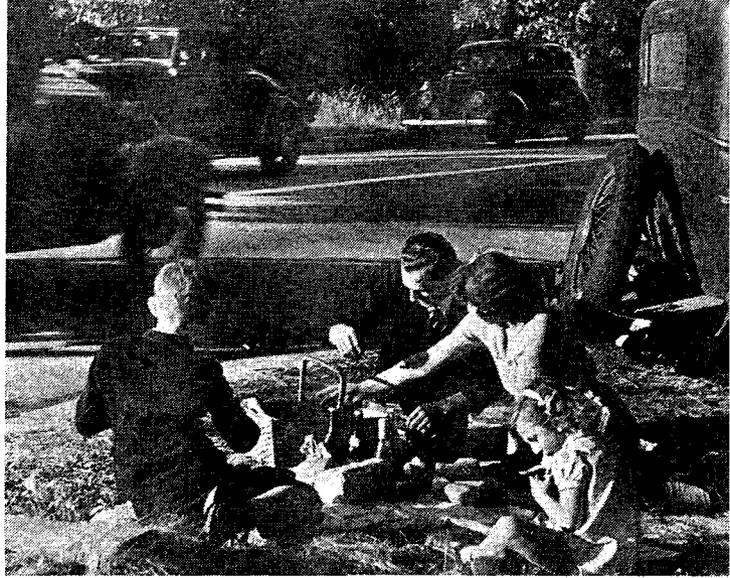

FIGURE SIX: Family recreation and the car. The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

and thus its trials could be seen as the source of malaise for the entire civilization. Lorentz suggested this when he wrote of the steeltown sequence, ". . . the horrible condition of the industrial town, is really a prelude to the city. This is what built the city. This is what gave it its wealth. This is really the culture that is the basis—the fundamental basis—of the mores of the city."[31]

Although the city's role in cultural transmission had been dealt with before, it was not until the late 1930s that major American writers put that theme at the center of their work. As its title suggested, Mumford's *Culture of Cities* built on this theme, opening with the assertion that:

> The city, as one finds it in history is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains on both social effectiveness and significance . . . here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order. Here is where the issues of civilization are focused.[32]

Significantly, Louis Wirth, who has been identified with a separate school of urban theorists,[33] took a parallel position at the 1937 planning meeting in Detroit when he said, "the city has become the dominant influence upon national life. It is both symbolic of modern civilization and the principal medium through which the mode of existence of mankind is being remoulded."[34] He then built on that premise, writing in the opening pages of "Urbanism as a Way of Life," that "the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the

world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, people, and activities into a cosmos."[35]

The strength of the film, then, was that it could select and present in dramatic form the seminal aspects of urban life which characterized the civilization. Richard Griffith recognized this capacity when he wrote, "this is a film full of details of behavior and aspects of the human countenance captured by specialists who know what behavior and countenances can mean emotionally."[36] As such it could fulfill the function of sociology, as well as art, as a few brief parallels with Wirth's article should illustrate.

Wirth's chief contribution to the field of sociology in "Urbanism as a Way of Life" lay in his visualization of the shift Cooley had identified from primary to secondary group relations in the transition from rural to urban life. Characteristically, Wirth said, urbanites meet one another in highly segmental roles. Typically, physical contacts are close, but social contacts are distant, a perception which is presented in *The City* through a host of images, most particularly through frequent shots of crowds, a frantic fast-food counter with its absurd automatic pancake maker, and an office full of secretaries, each typing away as part of their role as cogs in the new bureaucratic machine. "The close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation," Wirth continued. "To counteract irresponsibility and potential disorder, formal controls tend to be resorted to."[37] *The City* makes the same point by indicating that the policeman and the rule of law have supplanted the order of custom and habit, a theme reiterated through countless shots of prohibitory signs and, in the height of expression, a shot of a mechanized policeman waving his arms wildly out of control.

Another parallel interpretation emerges in the film's treatment of work and leisure. According to Wirth, "the segmental character and utilitarian accent of interpersonal relationships in city life finds their institutional expression in the proliferation of specialized tasks,"[38] especially in the division of labor. In the New England village portrayed by the film, work is organically related: "We work from sun to dark if you can call just work a job that makes a body full at peace. . . . Working and living we found a balance." While tools and machines (particularly the water mill) are utilized, they are relatively simple extensions of man: the sickle to cut the hay, the loom to weave the carpet. The shift to the steeltown emphasizes the diminution of man and his subjection to the rule of the clock, which has supplanted natural working habits. The new town attempts to restore that balance, with the commentator claiming: "You can't tell where the playing ends and where the work begins. We mix them here." In the new decentralized industrial plant, employees "reach a factory where the work and all that's part of it adds up to something that makes a worker glad to be alive."

By all accounts, Wirth's article was unknown to the film makers and had no direct effect on *The City*. Yet both his writing and the film managed to depict urban life not only in vivid but also in analytic terms, indicating how different stages of urban growth had affected the quality of American life. The very absence of Wirth's influence serves, then, as eloquent testimony to the film's own contribution to the study of urbanization.

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This discussion should have demonstrated that the message of any film to the historian is a complex and often inconsistent one, not the least because of the many different points of view it may accommodate. Just where ideas for a documentary like *The City* came from and how and when they were translated into cinematic language is a difficult process to trace. When such disparate groups as Stein's planning committee and the documentary film makers got together, the points of conflict were bound to affect the final product adversely. To have studied the film makers and their medium or the planners and their theories in isolation, however, would have detracted from a full appreciation of this film. For it is the shared perception of the urban condition as the basis of the crisis in modern American civilization that gives the film both its power and historical significance. In the sense that *The City* conveys that perception to a later audience, it stands the historical test, not just as an illustration of important planning ideas or of the capabilities of the budding documentary movement, but as a seminal statement in its own right on the state of modern American civilization.

<p style="text-align:right">The George Washington University</p>

footnotes

1. Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (New York, 1973), 114-117; Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), 362-363.

2. Mark I. Gelfand, *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965* (New York, 1975), 96-98.

3. Lewis Mumford, writing in the preface to the 1970 edition of *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1970), ix.

4. Richard Griffith, "The Film Faces Facts," *Survey Graphic* 27 (December, 1938), 595.

5. Joseph L. Arnold, *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954* (Columbus, Ohio, 1971), 47. Mumford later claimed that "had it not been for the ideas that the Regional Planning Association of America, under Stein's presidency had put into circulation during the twenties, the Greenbelt Towns undertaken by the Resettlement Administration in 1934 would have been inconceivable. . . ." introduction to Clarence S. Stein, *Toward New Towns for America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971, paper ed.), 14.

6. See Tracy B. Augur, "Radburn: The Challenge of a New Town," *Michigan Municipal Review* 4 (February, 1931), 19-22, 30.

7. Ralph Steiner, interviewed by James Blue, Center for Media Study, State University of New York, Buffalo, July 12, 1973.

8. Tugwell hired Lorentz to make films for the Resettlement Administration in June 1935, just at the time the decision to implement a greenbelt town program was being finalized. See Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1968), 24-25 and Arnold, *The New Deal and the Suburbs*, 36-44. Tugwell's college textbook, *American Economic Life*, which he coauthored with Roy Stryker and Thomas Munro, contained a picture of Sunnyside Gardens in the first illustrated edition, appearing in 1925. The next edition, appearing five years later, added illustrations of the Radburn town plan and town planning diagrams from the 1925 Regional Plan issue of *Survey Graphic* edited by Stein and Mumford. Neither text discussed the illustrations, however, and it is most likely that their inclusion can be credited to Stryker. See F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge, 1972), 12.

9. Robert Snyder suggests that Lorentz saw his role primarily in alerting the public to the problems he addressed in his films, rather than spelling out a government solution: "His task was to make the country see the need to spend money for these solutions. He believed he could make the audience see this need by showing the problem as powerfully as possible. Interestingly enough, the same approach to balance the treatment of problem and solution can be seen in the scenario Lorentz wrote for *The City*," *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 191.

10. Interview, New York City, July 8, 1975. Van Dyke made a similar comment in explaining why he shifted his professional interest away from photography in an interview with Harrison Engle, saying, "I left photography because it could not provide the things I knew films could provide. I was excited and interested in film as a pure medium of expression, but I was more interested in using it for a social end." See Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism* (New York, 1976), 275.

11. Interview with James Blue, Center for Media Study, State University of New York, Buffalo, August 2, 1973. Grierson had written in 1939 that the basic force behind the documentary movement was social, not aesthetic. "We were, I confess, sociologists, a little worried about the way the world was going. . . . We were interested in *all* instruments which would crystallize sentiments in a muddled world and create a will towards civic participation." Forsythe Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London, 1966), 18, quoted in Barsam, *Nonfiction Film*, 38-39.

12. G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Filmmakers* (Garden City, N.Y., 1971), 189.

13. Undated letter, July 1975.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Henwar Rodakiewicz, "Treatment of Sound in 'The City,'" in Lewis Jacobs, ed., *The Movies as Medium* (New York, 1970), 285, 282.

16. *Ibid.*, 281.

17. As interviewed by James Blue, Center for Media Study, July 12, 1973.

18. Letter, July 1975, as amended September 1976.

19. "The first documentary films in America achieved camera beauty and maybe some social significance, but not often and not well did they come close to human beings," Richard Griffith wrote. "What made this film is not a knowledge of lenses but an instinct for the experiences shared in common by everyone who lives in America. These experiences, big and little, really get on the screen for the first time in *The City*, and they pack a wallop, as is shown by audience reaction. Whether or not the people who see this picture are convinced, or half-convinced about city planning, they understand the point because it is put over in terms of traffic jams and hurried meals instead of statistics." *Films of the World's Fair of 1939*, paper for the American Film Center, March 1940, 27. *Sight and Sound* for June 6, 1939 made a similar point that *The City* ". . . has rendered urban life so sharply that it stands as one of the landmarks of the movie turned to public use." Writing for the June 3, 1939 issue of the *Nation*, Franz Hoellering said, "Both as picture and social document 'The City' is in parts superb. The shots of the steel town with many an epigrammatic detail, the sequence of the skyscrapers with the thousand voices dictating letters, the satirical portrayal of the congested highways go far beyond descriptive newsreel shots. They tell an exciting story in which are moments of great movie art."

20. Letter July 6, 1977.

21. From a copy of the original Lorentz outline, in the possession of Professor William Alexander, University of Michigan.

22. Roy Lubove, "New Cities for Old: The Urban Reconstruction Program of the 1930's," *Social Studies* 53 (November, 1962), 205. Perry presented the first full formulation of his idea in the seventh volume of the Russell Sage Foundation's 1929 *Regional Survey of New York and Its Environs*, under the title of "The Neighborhood Unit: A Scheme of Arrangement for the Family-Life Community."

23. Lewis Mumford, "The Neighborhood and the Neighborhood Unit," *Town Planning Review* 24 (January, 1954), 264.

24. Stein, *Toward New Towns for America*, 119.

25. Mumford's commentary reflected his feeling extending back to the early twenties that suburbs represented a "failure to create a common life in our modern cities," becoming "a common refuge from life." "The Wilderness of Suburbia," *New Republic* 28 (September 7, 1927), 44-45.

26. Lorentz listed the cart, the locomotive, the automobile and the airplane as "symbols of continuity" in the first page of his outline. Mumford had used similar references in explaining what he called the "fourth migration," out of the cities, with the covered wagon representing the first migration to the west, the train for the centralization of industrial cities, and the automobile as the symbol of the modern metropolis. Although he alluded to the possible impact of the airplane it was too early to anticipate its commercial impact when he wrote in 1925. See Mumford's "The Fourth Migration," *Survey Graphic* 7 (May, 1925), reprinted in Carl Sussman, ed., *Planning the Fourth Migration: The Neglected Vision of the Regional Planning Association of America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 57-58.

27. See especially the May 1925, special regional planning issue of *Survey Graphic* edited by Stein and Mumford, much of which is reprinted in Sussman's *Planning the Fourth Migration*, and MacKaye's *New Exploration: A Philosophy of Regional Planning* (New York, 1928). Appropriately enough, the opening sequence of *The City* was shot in MacKaye's home town of Shirley Center, Massachusetts, to which he had dedicated his book.

28. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 294-95.

29. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (New York, 3rd ed., 1952), 361.

30. Mumford specifically cited the Greenbelt towns as "a universal indication of biotechnic city design," in *The Culture of Cities*, 452.

31. Original Lorentz outline.

32. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*, 3.

33. Park Dixon Goist argues that while both Wirth and his colleagues at the University of Chicago and members of the RPAA viewed city life as an organism, the architectural planners shared none of the deterministic tendencies of the sociological ecologists. "The City as Organism: Two Recent Theories of the City" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Rochester, 1967), iv.

34. Lewis Wirth, "The Urban Mode of Life," in *New Frontiers in Planning: Proceedings of the National Planning Conference* (Chicago, 1937), 25.

35. Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (July 1938), 2.

36. Richard Griffith, *Films of the World's Fair of 1939*, 27.

37. Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," 15.

38. *Ibid*, 13.

85