

*The Plow,
The River,
And
The City*



Philip Liebson

Chicago Literary Club

February 13, 2013



Pare Lorentz

When I was about eight or nine, in the early 1940's, I was exposed to occasional short documentaries about our natural resources at our Tuesday assemblies. There was one however, that drew my attention perhaps because of the poetic alliterativeness of its script:

Down the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White and the Cheyenne;

Down the Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James and the Sioux;

These referred to rivers that emptied into the Mississippi and the documentary, *THE RIVER*, which was produced about seven years earlier, is one of three documentaries of the late 1930's mostly directed and almost entirely written by Pare Lorentz: *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS*, 1936, *THE RIVER*, 1937, and *THE CITY*, 1939. Pare Lorentz, originally Leonard MacTaggart Lorentz, had no film experience before directing his first documentary, except as a film reviewer in the 1920's. He had written a book in 1929 with Morris Ernst, lawyer and founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, entitled *Censored: the private life of the movie*, in which they condemned censorship of what they termed "adult entertainment", not specifically pornography, but realistic conversations among characters.

Perhaps a little background on Lorentz can set the stage [1, 2]. He was born in 1905 in West Virginia and attended Wesleyan and West Virginia Universities. In 1925 he moved to New York and became a writer and film critic for such leading publications as Judge, Scribner's, Vanity Fair and Town and Country as well as the New York Evening Journal. His big break came in 1933 when he wrote a pictorial review of Roosevelt's first year as President, *The Roosevelt Year*. In fact, Lorentz originally wanted to develop *The Roosevelt Year* as a film project but had difficulty funding it. The book he developed in 1933 consisted of a large series of photographs with his captions and commentaries. Roosevelt had read Lorentz's article of censorship and his pictorial tribute led to his entrance into the byways of Washington politics. For a while after the book was published, he wrote a column called Washington Sideshow for Hearst's King Features but Hearst personally fired him for an article in which he praised Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, another stepping stone to his career with the administration. *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (hereafter termed PLOW) was initially screened in the White House in March 1936. Lorentz eventually earned the sobriquet "FDR's Filmmaker".

His family, of German ancestry, had arrived before the Revolution and settled in what is now West Virginia. His grandfather fought in the confederacy of what was then Virginia but lost his land and voting rights when his part of the state became West Virginia in 1863. Part of what his grandfather had suffered was influential in Lorentz's interest in free speech and American history. Leonard used his father's first name Pare for his works. Lorentz's mother was a professional singer and that led to an interest in the emotional power of music in his films.

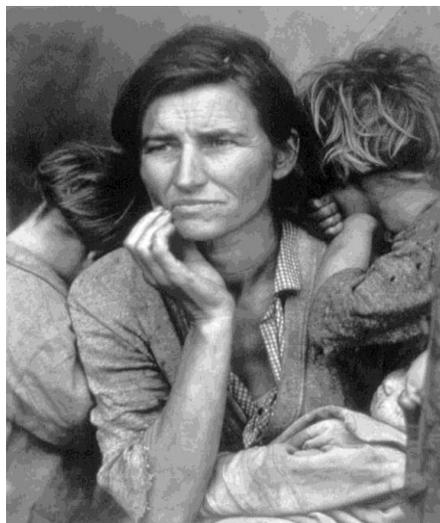
We take up the story in the year 1935. Let us set the stage. The 74th congress convened for the first time on January 3rd and the heavily Democratic majority in both houses had increased, 76% of the Senate and 74% of the House, both increases unusual for an off-year election for the President's party. It would accomplish quite a number of passed bills that year including Social Security, the Wagner Labor Relations Act, the Rural Electrification Act, and the Neutrality Act, to name but a few. Huey Long was considered the most dangerous man in America by Roosevelt. When asked by one of his staff whom he considered the second most dangerous man, Roosevelt replied "Douglas MacArthur" [2A]. Both problems were solved by Long's

assassination that year and MacArthur's transfer to the Philippines. Last but not least, It Happened One Night swept most of the Oscars.

The Dust Bowl had been created in the Great Plains by a severe drought now in its fifth year. To bolster support of the farmer caught in the drought, The Department of Agriculture set up a new bureau that year on May 1st, the Resettlement Administration, under Dr. Rexford Guy Tugwell, Under-Secretary of Agriculture, former Columbia Professor and one of the original Brain Trust [3]. Under the auspices of this administration, photographers and writers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and James Agee began to photograph and report about the poverty and devastation throughout the South and the Plains. The purpose of the Administration was relocation of those impoverished farm families and also urban families in poverty, conservation of natural resources, and improvement in farming techniques. It was to develop three suburban housing developments outside of Washington DC, Cincinnati and Milwaukee, called "Greenbelt" communities. The big break came to Pare Lorentz when the Administration chose him as film consultant.

Hired by Tugwell, in September, 1935, Lorentz and his crew started to film the ravages of the dust bowl from Montana down to Texas in the documentary to be entitled "*The Plow That Broke the Plains*" [4]. He explained to the people that were being photographed the purpose of the production and he received cooperation. Perhaps he might get a farmer to kick the dry dust or to have a housewife add a little dust to a young child's face for the filming, but the barren house fronts, withered crops, lean and dying cattle required no adjustment. Lorentz would occasionally pay those who desperately needed cash. As he reflected "They still have enormous pride. We stopped some and filmed them as they went by. When we talked to them we learned much of the cruel force that blighted them" [4].

There were problems in shooting the film. Since Lorentz was a neophyte filmmaker and his cameramen and technicians experienced professionals, he had difficulty in communicating his ideas. His script was sketchy. He intended to bolster it after the filming. There was as yet no narration. The cameramen were not quite New Deal supporters and eventually had to be dismissed [4]. What next? There was always the availability of stock footage from the Hollywood studios –BUT- Hollywood leadership was conservative and also not very happy with the New Deal. Remember that some Hollywood moguls had put up money and propaganda to oppose Upton Sinclair's "End Poverty in California" campaign for governor the previous year. The studio heads were opposed to what they thought was Roosevelt propaganda in making such a documentary, and barred him from obtaining footage. However, he must have obtained some footage for some brief images of soldiers marching and World War I action scenes.



Dorothea Lange Photograph 1936

Migratory Labor Camp

Here he now was, in California, bereft of support, no crew, little cash left, no narration, but who should come to his rescue than Dorothea Lange, who the following year would photograph that memorable woman, despairing, with her two children huddled beside her. Lange was photographing the migrant workers camp for the Farm Security Administration and helped Lorentz to film arriving workers with the money he had left over for one day's filming. A report by the California State Relief commission described a typical camp: "Old tents, gunny sacks, dry-goods boxes and scrap tin. These are the materials from which the dwellings are constructed. All the shacks were without floors...very dirty and swarming with clouds of flies ". As for sanitary facilities, "An irrigation ditch half-filled with muddy water has been used for all purposes" [5]. Another radio talk from an administrator in charge of land utilization reflected these findings and concluded:" I leave you to imagine what the effect of such a life on the people themselves and on the children who will constitute the next generation. "[6]

Lorentz had no money to edit the film since he needed to hire a composer for the score, which he considered essential for setting the proper tone. He edited the film himself after hiring a woman to teach him the technique. As he stated in his autobiography: "From the beginning of my moviemaking years, even though I had never set foot in the cutting room or been behind a camera, I wished to keep control of the three elements of my film – pictures, music, and words – and to emphasize the elements in that order".

Lorentz interviewed twelve composers [4]. He still had \$6000 left to work with, a reasonable amount for that time but not for an established composer. Virgil Thomson had incorporated traditional American folk songs into his music and had a similar feeling for American history as Lorentz and grew up in the Plains state of Kansas surrounded by the very landscape that Lorentz had filmed. Thomson was hired and produced a score in six movements based on the sequences of the film: Prelude, Pastorale (Grass), Cattle, Blues – Speculation, Drought, and Devastation. Thomson incorporated some of the folk music of the Plains area into the score. At times, the music would complement the film, at others, the film footage would be adjusted to the music. As

Thomson described it “When (Lorentz) gets the final recorded music track, then he goes back to the cutting room, finds inspiration for expressive visual narration through musical detail, and wholly recuts the film” [4]. The score was recorded by the New York Philharmonic, which completed the recording in overtime for free.

The filming was now finished and edited, the score was completed, now came the poetry of narration. Repetition runs through it both in the narration and the film, “high winds and sun, without rivers, with little rain”, and the sweep of wheat fields. All the elements of the rise and fall of the wheat belt are there, the initial shots of acres of wheat, the early migration to the plains, the cowboy on his horse, the plowing of the land, the cattle, the ever larger tractors and threshers, the wheat prices soaring after WWI, the speculation for ever increasing wheat production as prices soared, the “golden harvest”, the signs advertising investment in the growing wheat and ...then, a stock market ticker cutting to ever increasing number of threshers in each scene...finally the stock ticker falls to the floor.

The film was ready for distribution. Lorentz paid for some of the marketing of the film. First shown at the White House in March 1936 and several private showings, certainly at the Resettlement Administration, the first public showing was at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. Of course, the Hollywood studios would not agree to assist in its distribution, emphasizing its propaganda value and because it was not independent of government control. Working independently, Lorentz finally convinced the owner of the Rialto Theater on Broadway to show the film and it met with such acclaim that other film theater owners throughout the country agreed to show it [2, 4].

The film is 28 minutes long, all his documentaries were close to 30 minutes, and the last 10 minutes of PLOW describe the ever increasing dust bowl and despair, the land drying up, the cars heading west, the empty farms. The last two minutes are devoted to what might be called the propaganda for the Administration – Conservation of parts of the plains by the Department of Agriculture, shots of model farms built by the Civilian Conservation Corps with resettlement of families displaced by the drought. PLOW was considered by many as the first major use of the strictly documentary form in America

The Resettlement Administration had its own propaganda machine. Throughout the country, local Resettlement agencies were sending out information to the public. Here is an example from a mimeographed flyer from Region XI of the Administration in Portland Oregon, January 1936 [7]: “YOU’LL DIE SOME DAY! You may say ‘It can’t make any difference a hundred years from now’, but it does. ..Already the exploitation of our greatest natural resource, the land, is etching its handwriting on the wall of time...You will want the welfare and prosperity of coming generations to rest on a stabilized agriculture...fertile fields, lush grazing areas, protected forests and deserts transformed into agricultural oases through irrigation..”.

Just as the Administration had its photographers it also had its talented writers, employed during hard times. A Resettlement administrator delivered an address to the Humanist Society of Berkeley, California several months after the flyer summarizing the hardships of migrants to that state in trying to get work: “They had come in response to advertisements that workers were needed. ...Unfortunately unfavorable weather blighted all the crops while the migrants were on the road, so that they arrived to find no work. Many of the families had spent all their money on travel expenses...” [8].

Other Resettlement Administrators in regional centers took to broadcasting the results of their efforts: From New England: “Here in New England we have accomplished a great deal in the relatively short period of time we have been operating...aided two thousand New England farmers to adjust their debts” [9]. From the Otter Creek Demonstration Project (Vermont), a report of how the drainage problems can be eliminated to protect wild life and “in addition to the enjoyment of rugged and attractive scenery and a good stream suitable for fishing, canoeing, and swimming” [10].

Press Releases from the Resettlement Administration in 1936 spoke to management of farm expenditures. From New Haven [11]: “ The first task of the home management supervisor is to work with farm women in drawing up home management plans which will estimate what the living expenditures of the farm family will be upon a yearly basis”. In nearby Norwich Connecticut [12]: “A New London farmer is looking for a new future on his ten-acre farm...[Assistance has helped by] “a small grant to meet his immediate emergency...by ...employment on the resettlement project in North Stonington, and ...by a loan for the purchase of baby chicks”.

These releases and broadcasts were spurred on by weekly information memoranda by John Fischer, the Acting director of the Division of Information[13] : ”...every release, radio talk, and speech ...should have a sentence something like this... ‘The primary purpose of [the Administration] is to help farm families on or near relief to become permanently self-supporting ‘’. In a publicity guide for county supervisors [14]: “We feel...that the most helpful thing we can do is to prepare a simple manual of a few page [sic]...on public information ways and means---a veritable ‘short course’ in journalism”. Other information in these memoranda included references to radio speeches by prominent farm labor organizers and ways to promote cooperation by regional field personnel [15]. One regional advisor even arranged Christmas celebrations among a migratory labor camp with an NBC radio hookup [16]. One purpose would be that “...if some listeners are convinced that these folks have voices to sing with and fingers to fiddle with, the idea may permeate that they have bellies that get hungry and bodies that can feel pain”. Efforts were made by the administration to describe the effects of the drought: Although “Drought, dust, and erosion are fixtures in western and national consciousness...we must add...noxious weeds, which in places is worse than erosion...In certain areas poisonous weeds are simply taking over the countryside” [17]. However, the frustrations of regional advisors could be demonstrated by a letter from New Haven to the Nebraska regional office: “The information work in this region is piling up to such an extent that the crew of us is slowly but surely going haywire...We have a good deal of competition from other government agencies” [18].

The criticisms of PLOW were mixed. On May 12 1936, Maury Maverick, Democratic representative from Texas put into the Congressional Record: “While criticisms may be made of the Resettlement film because it shows a horrible waste of our natural resources, I think that the film of this character must by all means be shown to awaken our citizens to the necessity for immediate steps in conservation “ [19]. A movie house operator in Amarillo Texas, however, felt that Plow did not go far enough. He indicated that “local comment on the picture is that it [affected only] one side of the story” and that “it does not reveal one hundredth part of the actual conditions existing throughout [that part of Texas] that has been brought on by the land booms.

And swivel chair wheat farmers, and the continual pulverizing of this light soil that becomes finer with each cultivation” [20].

The Nation thought it a work of art. The Hollywood Reporter, also laudatory despite the studio negativity thought that “It takes the USA just three reels to equal the best of the USSR films in getting drama out of the soil”. Time magazine thought it a really good history of the Great Plains [21].

The Board of American Missions of the United Lutheran Church of America, in producing a motion picture of the work of the church, requested the inclusion of several sequences including “Southern white sharecroppers...staring into the doors of their shacks” and “A close up of a scrawny cow trying to reach thin brush in the sandy drought country”. [22]

But – in a pre-election blast from the McLaughlin South Dakota Messenger: “The most disgraceful, damnable and disgruntled piece of propaganda ever produced by any government. What good it can possibly serve as an educational feature ...is more than our mere mind can grasp unless it is to prove to the nation that God was wrong and Rexford Tugwell was right” [23]. It should be noted that in 1936, South Dakota went for Roosevelt and the Governor, two Senators and one of the two Representatives were Democrats. I have no record of how McLaughlin voted.

Despite Maury Maverick’s positive remarks, and the fact that the Resettlement Administration had constructed ninety-five camps for about 75,000 migrants with clean quarters and running water, Congress was generally negative about its value, felt that it was socialistic, which in a way it was, and felt that Tugwell was a poor manager, forcing his resignation. Moreover, the Administration was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court and expired in December 1936, to be reorganized as the Farm Security Administration. The latter had a long life and operated until 1946.

Nonetheless, Lorentz persevered and found a timely topic for his next documentary. There had been numerous floods of the Mississippi including the major one in 1927, an inspiration for a Faulkner novel, and in early 1937 the Ohio and subsequently the Mississippi flooded. It was the only time that a major league baseball pitcher rowed into a ballpark as Lee Grissom did in Cincinnati that spring. Only the water was running that day. Lorentz was asked to write an article for McCall’s magazine about the condition of the Mississippi Valley. Thinking that the article was too technical he wrote a poem about the river, and the poem was published. It was to become a contender for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry that year. After requests by numerous readers for reprints, he decided to use it for the narrative for his second documentary, *The River*.

In his narrative, his repetitious listing of the rivers that run into the Mississippi was Whitmanesque- the latter listed states, lakes, rivers and mountains in *Leaves of Grass*.

I present excerpts of the narrative here to demonstrate the magnetic effect of repetition: [24]

Down from the glacier peaks of the Rockies....

Down from the turkey ridges of the Alleghenies...

The Mississippi runs to the Gulf....Carrying all the rivers that that run down two-thirds of the continent

Down the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White and the Cheyenne,
 ...Down the Judity, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,
 ...Down the Rock, the Illinois and the Kankakee
 ...Down the Missouri three thousand miles from the Rockies
 ...Down the Red, a thousand miles from Texas
 ...Carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds the continent

The Mississippi runs to the Gulf.

There were parallels in technique and use of images in RIVER reminiscent of PLOW, Steamboats increasing abreast instead of tractors, and despite the stark contrast of a flood plain to an arid plain, the ravages of elimination of top soil due to forestry and farming leaving grassless areas unable to control the rain causing rivulets to become torrents into the Mississippi. Instead of the effect of WWI on the increasing harvest of wheat, we have the effect of the Civil War on the devastation of land bordering the Mississippi and the destruction of the cotton crop. An interesting characteristic of these documentaries is the depiction of printed matter without comment, with RIVER Robert E. Lee's long final message to his troops. Despite the Civil War having been over for three-quarters of a century the Roosevelt Administration was concerned about how the portrayal of the War would affect certain congressmen. Lorentz never received complaints otherwise, and in one memorable instance, an audience in New Orleans rose and stood silently while Lee's letter was on the screen [25].

Like Whitman, Lorentz's narration includes a series of lists, not only rivers but trees, cities on the Mississippi, a sequence of years up through 1937, the increasing height of the flood level. The images repeat the bale after bale of cotton being loaded and unloaded, the log after log being sent down the chute to the river, man and mule after man and mule slogging through the mud. In the fortuitous (for the filming) flood of 1937, the measures to combat the consequences provided a similar oral repetition [24]:

Food and water needed at Louisville; 500 dead, 5000 ill.

Food and water needed at Louisville; 500 dead, 5000 ill.

Food and water and shelter and clothing needed for 750,000 flood victims

Food and water and shelter and clothing needed for 750,000 flood victims.

- And so forth.

For RIVER, Lorentz finally had a full crew, considerably larger than that of PLOW, including film editors with a budget more than double the amount. With Virgil Thomson back as the composer and Thomas Chalmers returning as the narrator things ran smoothly. This time Lorentz

had no difficulty getting footage of such stock images as steel mills. Filming however was more extensive than *PLOW* with fourteen states involved rather than the five in *PLOW* [25].

Lorentz already had most of the narration from his poem in McCall's. What were needed were the film shots to reflect the sequence of the poem, and the musical score. Thomson composed the score after considerable research into folk and popular music. Whereas he used Mademoiselle from Armentières for the tractor scenes after WWI in *PLOW*, in *RIVER* he inserted orchestration for Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight for an extended sequence of logs floating down the river and various activities around the Mississippi. Lorentz described Thomson's collaboration: "Virgil made piano sketches of each section of the movie.... And then the crew and I tried to edit it down to a preconceived time, at which time Virgil would get some ...genius ideas, and we would work back and forth so that you did not have a completed score put on top of a completed movie and vice versa" [25].

The filming of *RIVER* began in October 1936 and was completed early in 1937 and included scenes of sharecroppers, steamboats, erosions, and toward the end, the building of dams with a concentration on the Tennessee Valley Authority. The theme was similar to that of *PLOW*, in that misuse of natural resources such as over cultivation, deforestation and the development of cities in the Mississippi basin contributed to the flooding, poverty and emigration from that area. Similar also to the scenes in *PLOW*, a sequence showed farmers leaving the land and heading west after the cotton crop was reduced due to land despoilage.

The filming was complex and separate crews had to be sent to the fifteen states where film shots were to be obtained. For example, one crew started in West Virginia in late December 1936 for two days, travelled to Knoxville for scenes of the Great Smoky Mountains, then to Resettlement projects in Tennessee, then to Muscle Shoals dam in Alabama, then to the Mississippi in January just in time to film the floods developing there [26]. Then they traveled up to Cairo, Illinois, for shots of the flood there, then to a refugee camp in Arkansas, then night scenes of the flood in New Madrid, Missouri, etc. Within less than two months, the topical scenes were completed and the Mississippi flood could not have been more timely within the scheduled plans.

Because the Resettlement Administration had been dissolved following the Supreme Court decision, before the Farm Security Administration took over, Lorentz was working for a time without a salary, but this time he had cooperation from a Hollywood studio to re-record the score at cost.

As with *PLOW*, the reviews of *RIVER* were mostly favorable. From the New York Times: "It is a poetic, stirring majestic picture". From the Buffalo Times: "THE RIVER is more effective than all the words that come out of 60 White House Press conferences or even 60 fireside talks". From the New York World-Telegram: "There are more real drama, photographic beauty and imagination in...THE RIVER...than you will find in nine out of ten so-called dramas produced in Hollywood". Even the Hollywood News was favorable, giving the nudge to the studios "Not a second...lacks drama...On any program old man river...should give Hollywood celebrities troubled moments" [27]. At the Washington premiere, the audience broke out into spontaneous applause according to the Washington News [28]. . In another review, the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat from a city quite familiar with the ravages of the Mississippi concluded that the River "is a film for the nation to see and ponder over...not synthetic floods and destruction staged by

Hollywood...but the statistical data of national wealth and waste written so all may read” [29]. The National Board of Review Magazine compared it favorably with the best work of Joris Ivens, [a noted Dutch documentary filmmaker of that era] “and Ivens has not done anything with the expanse of *The River*” [30]. The New Republic praised “the poetry of simple facts and names, the beauty of geography and national experience rising through the picture”. [31] As to propaganda. “the picture...doesn’t even have to try, because whatever it started out to do it has tapped a national dramatic source that has more potential splendor and vital energy than any number of quaint covered wagons or ‘births’ of a nation” . Mark Van Doren, reviewing it for the Nation entitled his favorable review “The Poetry of Erosion” [32]. The critic Lewis Mumford called it “almost the first evocation since Whitman that gives on the sense of the length and the breadth of the continent, of the realities of everyday life, of the good fortunes and mischances of the people” [33].

From far away Sydney, Australia, a member of the University Club sent a letter to Lorentz indicating that a representative group of the club had seen the film – bankers and industrialists among them “and their reactions have been uniformly good”. To quote the reaction of “a bluff old grazier”: “Turn him loose on Australia...Christ! What a picture he’d give us” [34]. It reached England and the reviewer from the London Observer noting that it was shown on British television, that “it was like a kind of white witchcraft to see it alone by the fireside, to have those fresh images and words, carried over four thousand miles of sea...in their small tin cans, suddenly set free on the air waves, to break through brick and wood and glass to confront you in your own room” [35]. This in 1937, well before even the first athletic event was televised in the United States! From Buenos Aires several years after the film was released, at a time when a Film museum was opening there, was a request from a newspaper executive to have RIVER and PLOW sent to Argentina and to consider having Spanish versions of the films. [36]

In 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, the Dutch head of a film consortium in Europe inquired as to whether PLOW and RIVER could be shown in Holland, Hungary and other European countries in order to “introduce all propagandistic films of the US Film Service in Europe... especially in non-authority countries”. [37]. It so happened that at that time there was a German film *Der Fluss* (The River) being shown in Germany, certainly not to be confused with Lorentz’s documentary, and it is possible that the Dutch film industry was concerned about possible distribution in what it termed “authority” countries. [38]

Letters from private individuals to Lorentz congratulated him on the production and gave advice. A Chicagoan went to see a movie “to while away a few hours”. The picture featured was *The Awful Truth*, a reasonably entertaining movie, but “the outstanding part of the program was “The River””...I hope it will serve to convince thousands of doubters of the fine work which ...is being pursued for the lasting good of the country” [39]. A man from Pensacola, after seeing the film, advised Lorentz to provide another film to remedy the situation. His advice: “cut ditches-wide and deep canals-from those large rivers emptying into the Mississippi...think of the thousands of men who would be employed ...divert the waters of the Missouri, the Arkansas, the Platte and the Canadian rivers into other channels, and you would have no more destructive floods in the lower Mississippi”. [40] He neglected to mention dams, a prominent part of the film and what was effectively being accomplished for flood control in the Tennessee valley.

In a book about vintage films in 1977, Bosley Crowther, quondam reviewer for the New York Times concluded that River is "...a model for many documentaries to come, and a training ground for ...documentary makers...[serving] in World War II" [41].

More to the point, letters were sent by movie house owners begging for early release. One letter addressed to the Administration by the President of a Broadway theater complained about the delay in his application, noting that his theater was a first run movie house with "an average attendance of ten thousand a week" and the fact that the movie was previously booked for such "second and third run theaters as the Carnegie Playhouse" [42].

The Farm Security Administration, now Lorentz's patron, did its best. In a memorandum to regional advisers, the tireless John Fischer of the Division of Information reported to regional information advisors that simultaneous openings of the River would occur the following month in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York and Washington and "as we did with "The Plow", we will expect the utmost cooperation from all regional information advisors in booking "The River". [43] Once the film opened, the intrepid Fischer sent a confidential memorandum to the information advisors that the New York papers had given "rave" reviews and that "the Criterion on Broadway is so excited about the attention given to the picture that it switched the billing and is making THE RIVER the top feature with the real feature the secondary.." and that "no charge is being made by Paramount [exchanges through the country] except for transportation" [44]. A special limited edition of the narration and photographs from the film were provided for FDR and his staff [45].

A film booker in Detroit wrote the National Emergency Council commented on the "very hearty" responses of the film audiences there. Parent-Teacher Associations were interested but the booker would only have them see the film in their neighborhoods, not in their schools. His opinion about the film was that "...audiences on the whole were pleasantly surprised by the contrast with all that stuff that Hollywood has been dumping on the theaters". Although "some of the boys thought it had a lot of propaganda in it, but...the more of that kind of propaganda the better" [46].

By 1940 the film had been distributed to schools, mine was one of them, and according to a letter from the Metairie Park Country Day School in New Orleans, it had been shown three times. The school was inquiring as to the possibility of using part of the narration from RIVER for a school dramatization about the Mississippi [47].

There were some concerns about booking the film in parts of the country. A regional information advisor in Little Rock, Arkansas, indicated that RIVER and previously PLOW could not be booked there because the owner of all the first run theaters was afraid of a Hollywood boycott if government sponsored films were shown [48]. He indicated that if local pressure could not get the film distributed commercially it would be shown privately. Unfortunately, I could not find any information about whether he was successful.

Perhaps the best indicator of the pragmatics of film making was a letter by none other than Walt Disney to Lorentz, finding River "thrilling and dramatic...and the narration and the music were perfect". [49] The creator of the only short subject of the 1930's that was arguably more successful, Three Little Pigs, decided that he wanted RIVER to run with "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", which in some ways was equivalent to allowing the Farm Security

Administration a license to print money. On top of that, River won the 1938 Venice Film Festival Award for documentaries, over Leni Riefenstahl's Olympiad 1936.

A contemporary essay on documentary film suggested the use of RIVER and PLOW as a basis for study of erosion, farm practices, as a visual aid in art to “study the moods of the river, of the forest, swirling masses of water to be expressed in whatever medium is at hand, the beauty of rivulets as compared with the force of the great river” [50]. In particular it focused on the educational value of ancillary elements for students and older groups seeing RIVER, including an explanation of the “hydrologic cycle”, after a rain storm observing the “nearest watershed to study the action of water down a hillside”, reading passages of Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi and other salient literature.

A book with photographs from the film was published by Lorentz without change in the narrative because, as he indicated in its preface, “I think it explains the pictorial history of the Mississippi River better than it might if it were elaborated into a smoother and more classical form “[51]

We now turn to the last documentary of the late 30's THE CITY. In 1933 a Hungarian-American advertising consultant, William Borsodi published a book entitled *Flight From the City* that reflected a movement to get back to nature. When the Borsodis lived in a cramped apartment in New York “our lives were barren of real beauty...which comes from contact with nature and from the growth of the soil, from flowers and fruits, from gardens and trees, from birds and animals...” [52]

Old deserted farmhouses within reach of East Coast cities with large acreage were available for those who would wish to heed the call to trade the problems of urban living with the challenges of clearing rocky soil. One of those who took advantage of this call to nature was Scott Nearing, a radical economist, product of the Wharton Business School of the University of Pennsylvania. Nearing, like many others in the 1930's left their urban positions, (at the time he was a professor of economics at the Wharton School), to rural Vermont, where he became a vegetarian farmer. In addition to the “Back-to-the-Land” movement, there developed over the previous 20 years a Garden City movement, evolving from British planned sites in the early twentieth century. The purpose was to alleviate the environmental problems of urban life with organically planned settlements with modern water, sewage, utility and health facilities in a semi-rural atmosphere [52]. It so happened that Rex Tugwell, while a student at the Wharton School, may have been influenced by Scott Nearing, one of his Professors, to see the economic advantages of such planning. A recent student of Tugwell's career considered that the “closest thing to his heart”...was the well-developed ideology of the garden city movement”. However, the “Back to the Land cry of the depression led to a new crop of families for the grim reaper of poor land farms”, according to another Resettlement Administration report [53]

And so, in his role in the Roosevelt Administration, Tugwell set about developing what were called “Greenbelt towns”, the name partially derived from the Agricultural Research Center at Beltsville Maryland, a source of the Resettlement Administration's tenants and jobs. So there were Greenbelt, Maryland, Greenhills, Ohio, Greenbrook, New Jersey, and Greendale, Wisconsin, four pilot towns near urban centers, planned by the Administration under Tugwell's guidance, called by the anti-New Deal press “Tugwell Towns” [54]. Their purpose was to provide an environment with parkland, dwellings facing away from the street, with wide inner

courts, meandering narrow streets, and routed underpasses and footpaths separating pedestrian from automobile. Among the proponents of this movement for garden towns were Frank Lloyd Wright and Lewis Mumford. Mumford was an historian of cities and a philosopher of technology. An authority on US architecture and urban life, Mumford would direct the narration of Lorentz's next project.

The New York World's Fair was to open in 1939. The American Institute of Planners wanted to commission a film, *The City*, about the importance of small town life, the evils of urban life, and the development of suburban planned communities to counteract urban degradation. One of its themes would be that Greenbelt worked. CITY was shown at the Science and Education Building, a Theme Center of the World's Fair. This film was not directed by Lorentz but he assisted in preparation of the script, along with Lewis Mumford and Henwar Rodakiewicz [55]. The film was directed Willard Van Dyke, one of the cameramen on RIVER. This time, Aaron Copland composed the music. Copland had been extremely impressed with Virgil Thomson's scores for the previous two documentaries and his composition reflected that.

Lorentz provided the outline for the shooting script [56]. For example, at the beginning of the film, showing the old New England Town: "You say, as simply, as possible, this was the way it was in [the] beginning. Pull out to show boy and dog leaving cemetery, wandering down green in the sunlight. Cut to open door of blacksmith shop. Our farmer is sitting on box talking to blacksmith who is fixing cart axle, wheel, or other part. You have, by now, used the cemetery, the town hall, the boy, the green, the sun, and the details of the village as visual design over which to say, simply, this is [the] way it was in [the] beginning". Symbolism mixed with poetry.

The completed film was in five parts, showing the harmony on a New England town before industrialization, then the intrusion of the "City of Smoke", then the dehumanizing "Steel City", then the "Endless City" of highways leading out of the metropolis with slow moving cars, with the grimness and exasperation on the faces of the riders [57, 58]. Finally, the sun shines with the "Green City, the city of tomorrow with the garden town". The narrator, Morris Carnovsky, asks the audience to choose between the current urban life and the places "where people are always getting ready to live, some other time, some other place".

Mumford, in his plans for the script, indicated several elements that were necessary for the film. One was "to show the life that has actually been lived, and is being lived, in the various types of city that lead up to that of the ...present" [58]. The second element was to provide "a clear image of the city as a whole: its physical order and disorder, its planning or misplanning". He considered the use of hands to dramatize actions and ideas "firm hands, greedy hands, useless hands, farmer's hands, gambler's hands, worker's hands". The hands would build the New England village, work machines in the industrial city, fingers would pick out numerals on an adding machine, hands building the green city.

The film relies heavily on symbols. For the New England town sequence, the rising sun against the pine trees in a New England town, the old water wheel, an old garden near a white house, the Church tower, the man hauling wood along with his horse around the village green and the Church [58]. The industrial town shows factories, "a spindly flower pot[near] a narrow window", a giant coal heap, workers' houses under a steel plant, dirty curtains, black smoke [58].

The metropolis depicts a fire engine traveling through a crowded street, trucks grinding people jammed into elevators, windows facing blank walls, a monotonous voice reading news off a ticker faster and faster...traffic signals changing from stop to go faster and faster. The rows of slow-moving cars leaving the city looking like a row of “Nazi helmets” according to one review [57], highways that could be a double edged sword, with congestion but also the routes to beaches, and parks and diverted from cities .

Finally, we have the green village, with sunlight over a dam, water spraying naked children, sunlight pouring through broad windows, children walking in an underpass away from traffic, houses slipping down toward a lake, committee room in the community, “moonlight on the faces of a man and woman in twin beds, her hand reaches over and tenderly touches his shoulder”. Remember these were the 30’s and a man and woman could not be seen in bed together in film, although the twin beds were close together! As with *Plow and River*, City narration was replete with poetry [59]:

But man builds toward his future

He builds toward his dream:

His cities are wrecked by fire and flood

They are ravaged by disease when people heap too closely together and

Are choked by their own foulness.

They are gutted out by conquering armies

The shifting earth covers them and the vultures circle over the last dead bodies

These lines among others were from a sound track preparation by Mumford and it is possible that Lorentz contributed a large part of it.

The Garden City depicted was not one of the rising Greenbelt towns under the aegis of the Administration, but Radburn New Jersey, founded as “a town for the Motor age” in 1929, eliminating motor from pedestrian traffic, with cul-de-sacs and parkland and a community center. [60] In fact, Radburn planning had been influenced by Forest Hills Gardens, in Queens, NY, developed between 1910 and 1914. While I was growing up, I walked through part of this planned community of Tudor homes, curved streets, and cultivated gardens to my school, where I first saw RIVER in class assembly.



Entrance to Forest Hills Gardens

As with the previous two documentaries, CITY was well received. The head of the English Department of a Seattle High School wrote Lorentz “The student body received “The City” with sympathy, understanding and interest [61] and included a review by one of the students: “Leaving a hope with the observer that the ideal city may someday be planned practically....this film proves that the war-bitten world around us [it was 1941] be itching, someone has not forgotten one of the weakest links in the structure of America”.

The future of the greenbelt towns was bittersweet. Several were turned over to the county government or local developers. Their many elm trees were mostly destroyed by Dutch elm disease. Greenbelt, Maryland was partially destroyed by a six lane limited access highway through part of the community. However, some cities have developed urban green belts such as San Francisco, and Boston, the latter having an “Emerald Necklace” around most of the center.

Radburn NJ and Forest Hills Gardens still enjoy much autonomy and their environments have not changed, with restricted development and decoration.

Lorentz served in the Army Air Corps during WWII making navigational films and documentaries for the Office of War Information. In 1946, he made a federally funded film about the Nuremberg trials that was shown in Germany but not in the United States until 1979. He made one post-war documentary in 1947 but further funding was not available for him from public or private sources. He lived quietly as a film consultant just outside of New York City and died in 1992.

Tugwell served as Governor of Puerto Rico during the war years, and continued his academic career at the University of Chicago and University of Santa Barbara. He died in 1979, 88 years of age.

What of the effects of RIVER and PLOW on modifying the ravages of floods and scorched earth on the current US landscape?

ABC World News May 10, 2011

“As the swollen Mississippi River continues to rush downstream, flood-level water is heading directly for some Louisiana communities still recovering from last year's [devastating oil spill](#) and possibly forcing hundreds of thousands of people to evacuate. The National Weather Service said the Mississippi River has reached 47.85 feet, according to the Associated Press. The river will continue to press against Memphis levees for at least the next few days, officials said. The Mississippi there has swollen to six times its average width. Further south, residents of Vidalia, La., have been warned to start working on an evacuation plan. Vidalia is directly located across the river from Natchez, Miss. officials said the river is expected to crest at a record level there on May 21.”

Nov 22 2012 NY Times

“The worst American drought in decades has deepened after more than a month of reports of slow improvement...more than half of the...United States has been in drought since summer...The amount of land in extreme or exceptional drought increased to 19.04 percent...The biggest area of exceptional drought centers over the Great Plains. Virtually all of Nebraska is in deep drought”.

Perhaps the cycles of nature cannot be ruled by careful planning, after all.

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Columbia University for providing much of the material for use in this essay. This specifically involves the Pare Lorentz Collections:

Series III: The Plow That Broke The Plains 1935-1942, Subseries III 1 2 3

Series IV: The River, 1935-1943, Subseries IV 1,2,3

Series V: Other Films, 1938-1969, Subseries V 1.

References from this collection are listed in order of appearance in the text by PL (for Pare Lorentz collection), Box number, folder number, title, and date if available.

References

- 1.Pare Lorentz http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pare_Lorentz
- 2.Pare Lorentz and the Films of Merit <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/lorentz/bio.html>
- 2A.William E. Leuchtenburg. Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940 New York Harper and Row 1963 p. 96 [Quoted from Tugwell, The Democratic Roosevelt Garden City 1957 p. 349 and Notes from a New Deal Diary January 17, 1933.

3. Reaping the Golden Harvest, Pare Lorentz, Poet and Filmmaker <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/lorentz/front.html>
4. The Plow That Broke the Plains <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/Lorentz/plow.html>
5. PL 40 2 Migratory Labor Camps by WF Baxter 7-8/37
6. PL 52 17 Radio Talk of Dr. CL Gray West and Farm and Home Hour 2/24/37
7. PL 40 4 Resettlement Admin Portland Region XI Oregon Volume I 1/36
8. PL 40 3 Resettlement Admin Address bef. Humanist Soc. Frederic Soule 6/18/36
9. PL 39 7 Broadcast by Harold Ballou 4/12/36
10. PL 39 7 Otter Creek Demonstration Project -
11. PL 39 6 Press Rel. US Dept of Agriculture Resettlement Admin New Haven 4/36
12. PL 39 4 Press Rel. Resettlement Admin Norwich Conn 1936
13. PL 40 7 John Fischer Farm Security Administration [FSA] 1/28/38
14. PL 40 7 John Fischer FSA 1/13/38
15. PL 40 7 John Fischer FSA 1/7/38
16. PL 40 7 John Fischer FSA 12/11/37
17. PL 40 3 Press Release Resettlement Admin 7/31/36
18. PL 40 6 Letter to Paul H. Jordan from George Gercke 4/11/36
19. PL 38 6 Congressional Records: Maury Maverick 1936
20. PL 52 6 Letter by GE Quillin to RG Tugwell 6/1/36
21. PL 38 6 Press Releases 1936
22. PL 52 3 Board of American Missions Anniversary Appeal 1938 10/12/37
23. PL 38 3 McLaughlin So. Dakota Messenger 1936
24. PL 48 8 Narration for the River 1936-1937
25. The River <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/Lorentz/river.html>
26. PL 52 7 Crew Shooting of the River 1936-37
27. PL 48 9 The River – Press Comments 1937
28. PL 48 9 The River – Information for the Press 1937
29. PL 48 7 St. Louis Globe Daily -Democrat –Ole Man River Has Leading Role 11/11/37

30. PL 48 6 National Board of Review The River by JSH 11/37
31. PL 48 7 New Republic - Old Man River Otis Ferguson 11/10/37
32. PL 48 7 The Nation- The Poetry of Erosion Mark Van Doren 10/30/37
33. PL 50 4 The River – Critiques 1937
34. PL 50 2 Merwyn Scales Letter to Pare Lorentz 12/22/38
35. PL 48 4 The River CA Lejeune the Observer London, England 6/5/37
36. PL 50 1 Manuel Pena Rodriguez - La Nacion to Pare Lorentz 9/16/41
37. PL 52 1 Letter by Iris Barry Museum of Modern Art to Miriam Bell 5/24/39
38. PL 52 1 Miriam Bell Letter to Edward Pelster 6/13/39
39. PL 52 6 Letter by Fred L. Hadley 12/15/37
40. PL 52 6 Letter by A. Shean to Pare Lorentz 12/11/37
41. PL 48 4 The River Vintage Films GP Putnam Sons NY by Bosley Crowther 1977
42. PL 50 11 AS Levin -Cameo Theater letter to George Gercke 2/20/38
43. PL 40 7 John Fischer FSA 11/12/37
44. PL 40 6 AA Mercey FSA 2/8/38
45. PL 48 5 Limited Edition of the River 1937?
46. PL 52 18 National Emergency Council Letter to Pare Lorentz 10/7/38
47. PL 52 18 Metairie Country Day School Letter to Pare Lorentz 3/16/40
48. PL 52 15 Letter by OE Jones to AA Mercey 3/10/38
49. PL 52 6 Letter by Walt Disney to Pare Lorentz 12/16/37
50. PL 48 8 The Documentary Film
51. PL 50 4 Pare Lorentz Preface to book of The River 1939?
52. JC Furnas They Didn't Just Stand There pp 312-319 Stormy Weather Crosslights of the Nineteen Thirties. An Informal History of the United States 1929-1941 GP Putnam's Sons New York 1977.Quote on p. 317
53. PL 40 3 Resettlement Administration 7/31/36
54. Furnas ibid Ozymandias in Washington pp 452-462
55. The City. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/FILM/lorentz/city/html>

56. PL 59 2 Pare Lorentz – Outline for Shooting Script [the city] 1938?
57. PL 59 4 The Cursed City- New Masses 6/6/39
58. PL 59 3 Lewis Mumford – The Basis of the New City 5/3/38
59. PL 59 3 Lewis Mumford – The City 5/23/38
60. Radburn, New Jersey http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radburn_New_Jersey
61. PL 59 1 Seattle Public Schools Arthur Rarig Letter 5/24/41