

The City

By Kyle Westphal

“The City” is a shape-shifting work of social criticism, radical in its rage, reactionary in its solutions. Financed largely by a \$50,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation and produced under the aegis of the American Institute of Planners, “The City” could be described as a propaganda film promoting the benefits and aims of city planning, but it was about more than that. Its scope encompassed a whole diseased society, its citizens divorced from their own identities and their own destinies—all on account of the march of unrestrained progress.

“The City” was that rare thing—the prestige picture that tackled poverty and degradation, a sociological tract that aspired to poetry. It boasted the finest pedigree of any America documentary made up to that time: an outline from documentary master Pare Lorentz (“The Plow That Broke the Plains,” “The River”), commentary written by literary critic and prominent urbanist Lewis Mumford, and the first film score from composer Aaron Copland. Its directors, Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke, were both veterans of the American avant-garde and the broader cultural Left: Steiner had devoted much time to the peripatetic Workers Film and Photo League in the early 1930s, while van Dyke was a founding member of Group f/64 alongside Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Imogen Cunningham. Both filmmakers had worked as cinematographers for Lorentz and contributed their labor to the leftist collective Frontier Films.

The documentary unfolds in three distinct sections over the course of forty-four minutes. The first section, shot in Shirley Center, Massachusetts, indulges in a nostalgic reverie for the bygone glories of community, family, and consensus achieved in small rural towns. The vision of America barely extends beyond pre-Industrial New England.

The second part presents a bustling city that has grown “more complex and less fit for living.” Mumford’s histrionic free-verse narration expresses contempt for industry, conformity, and, above all, modernity itself:

A spectacle of human power—immense but misapplied. Disorder turned to steel and stone. A million mechanisms. Almost human,



Advocating urban planning, the filmmakers present scenes of alleged squalor in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

super human in speed! Men and women losing their jobs, losing their grip unless they imitate machines, live like machines! Cities unrolling tickertape instead of life. Cities where people count the seconds and lose the days. Cities where Mr. and Mrs. Zero cannot act until a million other Zeroes do. Cities where people are always getting ready to live—always getting ready, never getting there.

It’s a bit of a rigged game: most of these city folks are photographed below the torso as they descend into the subway—conveniently, they *are* a flurry of faceless, anonymous Zeroes, at least to us. Steiner and van Dyke offer a parade of images meant to shock the conscience: an African American man shuffling up to a wretched tenement, soot-coated immigrant urchins playing baseball in the streets and shattering windows with each careless swing of the bat. “They grow up blank, these kids,” Mumford observes. Unlike the British documentary “Housing Problems” (1935), which covered similar material, none of the dispossessed is granted an opportunity to speak for themselves. (And also unlike the British model, “The City” juxtaposes its images of urban poverty with random violence, like the shock cut to a car tumbling off the side of a cliff.)

Stylistically, “The City” is a late descendant of the ‘city symphony’ genre that swept Europe in the late 1920s. Films like Alberto Cavalcanti’s “Rien que les heures” (1926), Walter Ruttmann’s “Berlin: Symphony of a Great City” (1927), and Dziga Vertov’s “Man with a Movie Camera” (1929) discarded conventional narrative in favor of a multidimensional documentary reportage stitched together from seemingly random scenes of urban life. But crucially “The City” presents

a black-hearted perversion of these techniques, assaying the lessons of the city symphony to condemn what the earlier films had celebrated. Everything in “The City” is aggressively defamiliarized and dangerous. Even the local diner becomes the site of frenetic, exhausting montage; the split-second parade of toast and coffee cups is impressive, but it’s a weak, confused counterpoint to the scorn registered in the narration.

The solution to this urban ennui comes in the long, final segment of “The City”, which presents the city planner’s vision of urban reform, as realized in Greenbelt, Maryland, and other planned communities. The soundtrack speaks of “sunlit factories and green communities”; images of uncongested free-ways and bicycling children and beaming, WASPy families fill the screen. Whatever became of those “blank” immigrant kids and people of color back in the city goes unremarked.

This was prescient stuff: more than a decade before Levittown, here were rows and rows of identical houses, each inhabited by a nuclear family with ample, easy leisure. The script is agnostic, but the rhetoric of images is unmistakable: our families can have a better life, away from the squalor of the city, away from the muck, away from all the minorities, the immigrants, the addicts, the poor. Here is the seed of suburban sprawl, urban renewal, and white flight that would define post-War America, for “The City” is finally not about fixing cities, but fleeing them.

No small-time picture, “The City” premiered in a make-shift movie theater at the Science and Education Building of the 1939 New York World’s Fair and proved a most popular attraction, screening several times daily. “If there were nothing else worth seeing at the fair,” wrote Archer Winsten in “The New York Post,” “this picture would justify the trip and all the exhaustion.”

After the fairgrounds, “The City” played theatrically—both in its original form and in a severely condensed version released by M-G-M under the title “This Is Tomorrow.” But the film’s core audience was non-theatrical, playing clubhouses, lodges, churches, colleges, and film societies in hamlets far and wide in 16mm. It remained a staple of such programming for more than a decade. By virtue of its energy and variety, it was the perfect documentary for a skeptical audience who suspected that any film with social content probably smelled like homework. “If all documentaries could be like this one,” opined Winsten, “there would be no reason they shouldn’t run for two hours ... and delight millions. A new horizon has come into sight.”

Despite the relentless editorializing, its core ideas were expansive enough to make “The City” an all-purpose educational film. As Gloria Waldron reported in her 1949 library survey, “The Information Film,” Steiner and van Dyke’s documentary filled many gaps:

This film has been seen by thousands of adults who would probably not be likely to read about city planning or to hear speakers on the subject ... “The City” may be used for highlighting a dozen different problems: child care, family life, public housing, slum removal, health problems, mental hygiene, city government, economic decentralization, and so forth. On some of these subjects, no specific films are available. So one must turn to related films instead ... “The City” is stimulating stuff for psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, home economists, architects, cultural anthropologists, and anyone else interested in urban American life *circa* 1939. Needless to say, it is an enduring delight to people who merely like good films.

These were not hypothetical interest groups either. Already by 1941 the Museum of Modern Art, then renting 16mm prints of “The City” for the bargain basement price of \$4.50, boasted in its sales brochure of “many hundreds” of diverse users who either borrowed or leased a print of the film, including the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Bedford Park Presbyterian Church, the Long Island Lodge of Danish Brotherhood, and the St. Louis League of Women Shoppers. Though conceived for a narrow propaganda purpose, “The City”’s vision of the disaffections and disillusion of modern life contained multitudes.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Kyle Westphal is a programmer at the Northwest Chicago Film Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to the exhibition, dissemination, and preservation of celluloid history. Westphal began his film career at Doc Films, the University of Chicago’s year-round, student-run cinema-theque, serving variously as treasurer, projectionist, historian, and ultimately programming chair. He subsequently served as the Chief Projectionist of the Dryden Theatre at George Eastman House, and also projected at the Little Theatre, the Film Studies Center, and the Wisconsin Film Festival. On behalf of the Northwest Chicago Film Society, he supervised the photochemical preservation of the independent musical feature Corn’s-A-Poppin’ (1955). He is a 2009 graduate of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation.