“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, 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 Zeros 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 Zeros, 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, assay-
ing 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, ex-
hausting 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 communi-
ties. 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 am-
ple, easy leisure. The script is agnostic, but the rhet-
oric 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 im-
migrants, 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 fi-
nally 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 Build-
ing 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, col-
leges, 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 vari-
ety, it was the perfect documentary for a skeptical
audience who suspected that any film with social
content probably smelled like homework. “If all doc-
umentaries 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 remov-
al, health problems, mental hygiene, city gov-
ernment, economic decentralization, and so
forth. On some of these subjects, no specific
films are available. So one must turn to relat-
ed films instead ... “The City” is stimulating
stuff for psychologists, sociologists, philoso-
phers, 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 rent-
ing 16mm prints of “The City” for the bargain base-
ment 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 con-
cieved for a narrow propaganda purpose, “The City”’s
vision of the disaffections and disillusionments 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.

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