

## **From New Deal Propaganda to National Vernacular: Pare Lorentz and the Construction of an American Public Culture**

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### **introduction:**

Pare Lorentz's *The River* took the top award for documentary at the 1938 Venice Film Festival, in the process beating Leni Reifenstahl's *Olympiad* for this prestigious recognition.<sup>1</sup> It is more than ironic that the success in fascist Italy of this US government-produced film, a success that came at a time of increasing ideological polarity, would be greeted in the United States with a boycott by the motion picture industry and a refusal by states such as Texas to allow the film within their borders. Yet others in the US, from the *New York Times* to Walt Disney, praised the film.<sup>2</sup> The enthusiasm that it generated in some circles was easy enough to understand: built around Lorentz's Pulitzer Prize-nominated poem, shot by Academy Award winning cinematographers such as Stacey and Horace Woodward and Floyd Crosby, accompanied by a stirring score written by leading American composer, Virgil Thompson, *The River* had all the elements of a cinematic masterpiece. But the surprising antagonism that it generated, to the point where regions of the country refused to see it and commercial theaters refused to carry it, points to a different set of issues. Clearly the problem had nothing to do with the cinematic values of Lorentz's documentary, since it was rejected sight unseen. Rather, the status of the film as a product of the federal government (and the Roosevelt administration in particular) raised a spectrum of concerns, with the film being seen as an assault on states' rights, as pro-Roosevelt propaganda, as unfair competition with the Hollywood industry, and even as bad public relations for drought-affected states such as Texas.<sup>3</sup>

Although each of these concerns was, from a certain perspective, understandable, something much larger was at stake. *The River*, apart from being either an extraordinary

documentary or an insidious piece of political propaganda, was also an emblem of a new national public culture that was taking form in the 1930s. Although variously praised and attacked by critics on the left, right and center, its resonance with a larger cultural project which included government-sponsored, independent, as well as commercial productions in a variety of media was far more profound than the particulars of partisanship....or so we will argue in this essay.

Our goal is to reconsider elements in the American documentary movement of the 1930s, particularly in those films such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937) made under contract with the Roosevelt administration, as part of a larger effort to construct a national public culture. These films have been extensively discussed, their production histories amply detailed and their reception histories duly recorded (information that will not be repeated here).<sup>4</sup> They have been characterized by some as poetic, revealing the soul of the crisis years; and by others as disengaged and even superficial. But our argument here is different: at a moment of crisis marked by fragmentation, violence, and local political oppression, the documentary film (and these films primary among them) played a key role in helping to establish a national vision, and with it, hegemonic control. Together with other cultural expressions, they helped to forge a new vernacular and establish a space for an emphatically national public discourse, in the process relegating regionalism and states-rights to the margins.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, this is not to deny that their agenda was in part politically partisan, for it was, ranging from centrist to overtly leftist. Rather, it is to argue that the real and lasting power of these documentaries can be found on another, more abstract level, one having to do with a new awareness of film as a communications medium, and a new understanding of its relation to the project of constructing a national public, and indeed, a nation.

In film terms at any rate, this new realization was largely restricted to the documentary form. With a few exceptions such as LeRoy's *Golddiggers of 1933*, Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, Vidor's *Our Daily Bread*, and Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, the Hollywood film chose to stay its course, hewing to established vocabularies and narrative sensibilities, and living up to its claim as 'dream factory.'<sup>6</sup> But if the film industry generally shied away from exploring the social and political contradictions of the period, other domains embraced this new perspective with vigor, in the

process constructing new idioms for their expression and forging a new relationship between medium and nation.

The photographic documentation project of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), popularized by such books as Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Lange and Taylor's *An American Exodus*, and White and Roskam's *12 Million Black Voices*, sought to "introduce America to the Americans" as the project's director, Roy Stryker, put it. In fact, the FSA's photographic project initially sought to introduce poor, rural America to urban, middle-class Americans; but in so doing, it also helped to establish a new vocabulary for describing the nation, redefining it in a way that had not been previously seen in either photojournalism or film. Likewise, the Works Project Administration (WPA) mural projects which graced the walls of post offices and government buildings around the nation celebrated labor (usually agricultural and industrial) and the achievements (usually historical) which helped to build the nation, ignoring the gentlemen patriots and presidents usually associated with the project of nation-building.<sup>7</sup> A new breed of public statuary heroized the common working man and woman, and together with a new music which drew on regional and folk melodies composed by the likes of Aaron Copeland and Virgil Thompson, these initiatives helped to define a new and particular national culture.<sup>8</sup> Like film, the media of photography, public murals, and public sculpture (together with the element of popular folk music) had a special status, neither traditional nor particularly well-established in the aesthetic or cultural terms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like film, they were popular in their associations and references, eschewing both the effete-ness of traditional highbrow culture and eliteness of high modernism. And like film, their setting was emphatically collective, social, and rooted in the public domain. Their condition of being was by definition public, as was their ownership. Although there were certainly important corollaries in literature, painting, and theater, the prominent public character of these long marginalized expressive forms put them in the foreground of efforts to define a new national culture. Murals, public sculpture, photography and photojournalism, folk music, and the documentary film would serve as emblems of the new aesthetic.

## the films

A film critic (and a critic of mainstream Hollywood fare) since the 1920s, Pare Lorentz had no experience as a filmmaker prior to directing *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (hereafter, *The Plow*). His success in becoming director of *The Plow* may have had something to do with the fact that he edited a collection of photographs of Roosevelt (*The Roosevelt Year, 1933*), that he was an outspoken New Dealer, and that his brother-in-law was an assistant to the Secretary of Agriculture, the person ultimately responsible for the Resettlement Administration (RA), the organization that produced the film. The connection would not go unnoticed, but personal affiliations aside, the fate of Lorentz's films would often rest on the mere fact that "the government" sponsored them. Indeed, the films produced for the RA, the FSA, and the United States Film Service (USFS) between 1936 and 1940 are to this day the *only* peacetime films produced by the US government that were intended for commercial distribution and public viewing.<sup>9</sup>

A few words about the organization that sponsored the film are in order. Founded in 1935, the Resettlement Administration had three goals: to preserve natural resources by preventing improper land use and destructive farming and forestry activities; to relocate the rural and urban poor to regions where they had a better chance of prospering; and to experiment with new forms of suburban housing developments ("greenbelt communities") in order to enhance the fit between man and nature. The RA was aggressive in its promotion, and planned a multi-media campaign that included photographic documentation, brochures and books, radio programs, and films. The plans for film included an 18 part series beginning with a film on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). But Lorentz approached the RA's director, Rexford Guy Tugwell, with plans instead for a film on America's great "dust bowl" – a vast area of grazing and farm land destroyed by drought and poor farming techniques, and the source of impoverishment for millions of farmers. *The Plow* would emerge as the first in the series, with *The River* taking up the promotion of the TVA a year later.

Thomson's music, so central to the film, gives a shorthand entry to its content. It was built around six movements: Prelude, Pastorale (Grass), Cattle, Blues (Speculation), Drought,

and Devastation. Offering a historical look at the abuse and destruction of a once fertile plain through overgrazing, poor farming techniques, land and grain speculation, and of course natural disaster, *The Plow* ended with an appeal on behalf of the thousands of now desperate farmers who lived there.

*And a chance for their children to eat,  
to have medical care, to have homes again.  
50,000 a month!  
The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter in  
American agriculture.*

The combination of Lorentz's eloquent script, Thompson's moving score, and a photographic style that evoked the best of FSA/Film and Photo League documentation, created a quality that was unique to government initiatives, and rare even in period documentary circles.

Existing discussions of *The Plow* usually discuss the enumerate the trials and tribulations of the film. Shot by a dream-team that included Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz, and Ralph Steiner, the production faced ideological problems (Lorentz's views were too tame for his Film and Photo League comrades), funding problems (the government failed to keep its commitments), organizational difficulties (the script was finished after the shooting), and obstructionism (film libraries refused to sell Lorentz stock footage). But despite these problems, Lorentz managed to create a compelling film, due as much to a high shooting ratio as to his method of using the score as the through-line to which the imagery was edited. Lorentz's script and Virgil Thompson's score gave the imagery a remarkable coherence.

Unfortunately, the film was blocked from exhibition in most commercial cinemas. The reason given was the project's length (too long for a short, too short for a feature), but in truth, the RA-produced film was seen by some as little more than propaganda for Roosevelt's political agenda, and by others as a worrying sign of the government's entry into commercial film production. Only after New York's Rialto Theater was persuaded to show the film, and the film demonstrated its powerful impact on the public, did it receive anything like the commercial distribution that was initially envisioned.

*The River* had a different fate. Produced for the RA's successor, the FSA, *The River* was intended to do for the nation's rivers what *The Plow* had done for the land, in the process, helping to support one of the New Deal's capstones, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Frank Nugent's enthusiastic review in the pages of the *New York Times* described *The River* in the following terms:

...*The River* is an epic – an epic of the great brown giant that served man and rose against him when he betrayed it. It is the story of neglect and ignorance and greed, of cotton land milked dry, of ruthless timber cutting, of earth scarred by the miners of coal and iron. It is the story of the river's rebellion, of floods and erosion and the desolate wasting of the land. And it is the story, still in its first chapters, of reforestation, scientific land cultivation, of dams and power plants and model homes. It is the story of the Mississippi as told by a modern realist, not an Edna Ferber in romantic salute to the past.<sup>10</sup>

Lorentz again had the foresight to work with a superb crew, including included Murnau's cinematographer on *Tabu*, Floyd Crosby, the academy-award winning Woodward brothers, Willard Van Dyke, and (again) Virgil Thompson for the score. Again, Lorentz had the film cut to the score, but this time the text, in the form of a poem that Lorentz had published in *McCall's* magazine, existed in advance. And again, as with *The Plow*, *The River* was blocked from distribution and exhibition in commercial venues. Giuliana Muscio reports that Roosevelt, enthusiastic about the film, personally intervened and had Tom Corcoran, an important figure in the second New Deal, put direct pressure on Hollywood. Corcoran threatened anti-monopolistic action if the boycott continued, and Paramount, already under investigation, finally relented and agreed to distribute the film.<sup>11</sup> It was eventually screened in some 3,000 theaters.

As we suggested at the outset, one can certainly appreciate these films in terms of their conditions of production as something visionary, hard-fought, and significant in their integration of word, image and sound. And one can understand both the motives for their production (fervent belief in the New Deal, opportunistic propaganda, etc.) and for their reception (ditto). But our claim that these films function in the service of a larger project of nation-building, of constructing a

vernacular for a new national cultural sphere, requires putting the films in a different set of contexts.

**context:**

How might we locate this new vernacular and concern with nation? How might we understand the turn to a collective mode of expression and a new valorization of artistic forms long relegated to the margins as decorative or ephemeral or folkish? And how might this development relate to apparently similar activities in Germany and the Soviet Union? Pursuing the case of the documentary film, we might approach these questions by considering the context within which the films were made and received. Specifically, we will briefly consider four factors: the transformation of certain media practices; the reorganization of the national political agenda; the development of a new expressive vernacular; and the context provided by alternative cinematic practice.

In remembering the late 1920s and early 1930s, Leo Seltzer, a leading figure in the Workers' Film and Photo League, spoke of the problem of communication and fragmentation. Workers were largely cut off from one another, whether in terms of industry, or in terms of geographical region. Lacking national unions, without access to any sort of national news forum, and indeed, absent any media representation save that of their class enemies, the growing workers' movement was actively hindered by the situation. Seltzer's comments speak to the larger condition of American life in the late 1920s characterized by a timid newsreel industry where controversy was avoided at any price, a weak national press, and a carefully controlled radio system subject at the national level to the interests of Rockefeller and his likes. Certainly for those issues relating to the (inter-)national economic crisis and the growing uncertainty regarding long-held social and political beliefs, the existing national news media were of little use beyond offering a means of distraction, or repeating the Hoover administration's party line about the inevitabilities of belt-tightening and the cyclical nature of a boom-bust economy. More generally, however, such fragmentation simply reflected the weak state of the nation, which was perhaps better described as a confederation of states. Central authority, long a site of

contestation, was hindered by the immense size of the nation and the limited media infrastructure.

But that would all begin to change: the early 1930s witnessed a transformation in the use of certain media. Roosevelt's deployment of the radio for his nationally broadcast "fireside chats" took advantage of the medium to generate a central and unifying vision of things. Radio's intimacy allowed the new president to speak directly to people around the nation in their living rooms; and its immediacy permitted the nation to be addressed instantly and as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Bypassing the filters of the national press, the president carried his agenda directly to his constituency.<sup>13</sup> Photography, too, played a new role. Various agencies of the federal government such as the FSA commissioned massive documentation projects, claiming to create a snapshot of the state of the nation. The scale of this federal project was unprecedented, as was the gesture of holding up a mirror, however distorted, to the nation. In fact, it was a one-way mirror, with the rural poor seeing themselves, and the middle-class urban seeing through the mirror to their poorer brethren. The resulting portrayal resonated within photojournalistic practice as federal documentary photographers published their work in book form and in journals such as *Life*, *Look*, *Fortune* and *Vanity Fair*, in the process helping to shape a new aesthetic while endowing photography with a grand national mission. In music as well, the folk melodies of Appalachia, the south and the west were in the process of being constructed as key parts of the national heritage – a process assisted by the joining of the popular radio and the recording industry, and extended into the progressive salons of the east thanks to composers such as Copeland. The film medium as well, particularly the documentaries of the Film and Photo League and the FSA, played a key role in circulating new types of images and helping to make connections between disparate parts of the political economic environment....a practice in sharp contrast with mainstream Hollywood fare which while national, was also one-directional.

In considering these developments, one is struck by the role of nation, as body politic (the Roosevelt administration), as land mass bound together by media networks (radio, photojournalistic endeavors such as *Life*, and the cinema distribution circuit) and as cultural force (regional images, stories, and melodies). The Roosevelt administration encouraged the recording



of the nation's condition, even though the state of that condition was at times shocking. Its goals were transparently political, in the sense of using these new depictions of nation as a way to galvanize support for a partisan agenda. In sharp contrast to the previous Hoover regime, it acknowledged glaring contradictions in the economic and social life of its citizens, just as it sought to mobilize national resources to create a better balance. And, as the examples of radio, photography, and film demonstrate, it seized upon a notion of media that enabled direct communication between the political leadership and the people, attempting (despite partisan critiques) to bind the nation together as one. By documenting the condition of "we, the people" (however skewed and loaded that "we" might be), by celebrating their diverse visual and musical heritages, and by physically linking the whole of the nation through image and sound, the media demonstrated both newly discovered capacities and a much sharper sense of self-consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Media's power came, as much as anything else, through the circumstances in which it found itself. The Hoover administration's policies served only to exacerbate the downward spiral that characterized most Western economies in the period. Widespread critique gave way to increased polarization within the domestic electorate. Left activism, drawing its inspiration from the successes in the Soviet Union only a decade earlier, joined with the labor movement, then struggling to give workers in many sectors the right to strike. Industrial owners, fearing both immediate economic collapse and longer term concessions to organized labor, fought back with vigor, doing their best to exterminate any signs of organization. Their brutal tactics, coupled with the increasingly evident impoverishment of a significant portion of the nation, and the involvement of the state as an agent of oppression, provoked many intellectuals into action. Seeing the collusion between industry and the state, many intellectuals were mobilized to protest whether through argument or creative expression. There was a new story to tell, and since the exiting media were largely content with repeated old mantras, an opening was provided for new communications strategies, new content providers, and a new social agenda. The shared commitment of workers, intellectuals, artists, and political activists (by no means mutually exclusive categories) opened the way for alternative representations both in terms of supply and

demand. Sometimes, as in the case of film, this would mean developing alternative production, distribution and exhibition strategies since the dominant industry saw little reason to involve itself in this culturally critical initiative.

The Roosevelt administration's "New Deal" to a limited extent tapped into this shifting set of perceptions and needs<sup>15</sup>. It crafted a new sort of national, socialist, democratic ethos. The president's strategy was clear: "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."<sup>16</sup> And so, the "failures" of unemployment, malnutrition, bank closings, agricultural overproduction, rural poverty, bankruptcies, labor organization, etc. were each taken on from a significantly different perspective than had characterized Hoover's efforts. The federal government flexed its muscle as a highly centralized national authority, concerning itself with everything from stock-trading practices, to the acreage a farmer could plant, to the production of art. The national government redefined itself as a protector, as a source of vision and a provider of aid, activities which took form through the alphabet soup of countless new organizations such as the RA, FSA, TVA, CCC, WPA, and NRC.<sup>17</sup> The right of workers to organize and withhold their labor was respected, with the result that by 1935, nearly a third of the organized workforce was on strike. A shift from individualism to a new form of collectivity was also evident in the government's expansion of the social welfare net. And the Roosevelt administration initiated the largest public art program in the nation's history. Between 1933 and 1943, over 10,000 artists found government support. Art and culture were, in a profound sense, democratized and made accessible to all, both drawing upon and complicating Matthew Arnold's notion of culture as 'the best that has been thought and said'. Art and culture were seen as products "of the people, by the people, and for the people," in this way managing to speak to both nationalists (the words echo the US constitution) and socialists alike.<sup>18</sup>

But of what would this new culture consist? Where would it take its reference points? On this topic, Roosevelt provided a clear view: "...the people of this country were taught by their writers and by their critics and by their teachers to believe that art was something foreign to America and to themselves – something imported from another continent and from an age which was not theirs – something they had no part in, save to go see it in a guarded room on holidays

and Sundays. ... But recently ... they have discovered that they have a part. They have seen rooms full of paintings from Americans, walls covered with all the paintings of Americans – some of it good, some of it not good, but all of it native, human, eager and alive – all of it painted by their own kind in their own country, and painted about the things they know and have looked at often and have touched and loved.....”<sup>19</sup> Roosevelt’s words speak powerfully to the desire for a robust, popular, national aesthetic, an art fashioned from the realities of daily life in America, in short, a new vernacular. European culture, the culture of the past, was sacralized (to use Lawrence Levine’s term<sup>20</sup>), but hardly relevant to daily life. Its cultural significance certainly merited nodding obeisance (together with the occasional visit to a grand but dusty museum), but it lacked the relevance and vitality of a new era’s art; it missed the passion and immediacy required by a people who were struggling to redefine themselves and their place in the world; and it failed to address the particularities of the American nation. In its place, a new American vernacular appeared on the pages of Willa Cather’s, Stephen Crane’s, and Dashiell Hammett’s books; it could be seen in Edward Hopper’s paintings of cityscapes, or Norman Rockwell’s sentimentalized illustrations of Americana; and it could be heard in the strains of folk melody and country rhythm that accompanied the rediscovery of the nation’s musical heritage. An American art emerged, one proudly embracing the specificities of time, place, and people. After centuries during which American artists either aped European developments or found themselves relegated to the sidelines of the amateurish, regional or folkish, the time had come for a national art and a reversal of fortune. This is not to say that cultural elites or their institutions abandoned their tastes for European art, for as their collections to this day attest, they did not; but rather, it is to say that a new rally cry was heard, and that an until now marginalized vision found discursive, financial and exhibition support.

The distance between Honniger and Copeland or Picabia and Hopper is easy enough to discern. But perhaps more revealing are those junctures where American and European practice seemed to run parallel, if not overlap. For example, if we consider the work of the American Precisionists in photography and film (Paul Strand, Charles Sheeler, Edward Weston, and so on) in relation to Germany’s *neue Sachlichkeit* (with practitioners ranging from Albert Renger-Patzsch

to Walther Ruttmann), both movements appear to combine a modern formalist sensibility with a emphatic sense of realism and the everyday. Beyond strong correspondences in topics and representational technique, it seems as though both groups had strong historical debts to earlier developments in European modernism. Such movements as Cubism, Expressionism, and Constructivism had received extensive and well-informed critical coverage in the US; and artists such as Charles Sheeler attributed important turns in their own practice to the influence of Francois Picabia, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp. That segment of the early American avant-garde in film most closely associated with documentary realism -- Irving Browning (*City of Contrasts*, 1931), Jay Leyda (*A Bronx Morning*, 1931), and Herman Weinburg (*A City Symphony*, 1930) -- owed much to Leger's *Ballet Mecanique*, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Ruttmann's *Berlin, Sinfonie einer Grossstadt*, and Ivens' *Regen*.<sup>21</sup> Like the work of Ruttmann, Vigo, and Vertov, the films produced by Browning, Leyda, et al. offered a stylized encounter with the city, one quite formally precise and concerned as much with visual surfaces and rhythms as with evident social contradictions. Yet one senses a "particularity" and concern with the object in the work of American Precisionist filmmakers (and photographers) that is distinct from even closely related European movements such as the *neue Sachlichkeit*.<sup>22</sup> This "particularity" recall's Barbara Novak's characterization of the (19<sup>th</sup> century) representational tradition: "Through it all, the *thing* dominated, amounting, in fact, to a preoccupation with *things*, amplified by concerns with light, space, weather, and time that were often additional routes to the character of an environment shaped by things, as well as extensions from the world at large to the thing."<sup>23</sup> More than objectivity as a style, and a tendency to give matter to formal concerns as was the case with their European counterparts, the Americans tended to let formal concerns emerge from their preoccupation with the specificity of material objects.<sup>24</sup> It perhaps bears mentioning that even though many of these examples (both European and American) deal with urban and industrial motifs, the distinction in treatment holds with the depictions of nature that characterized Lorentz's films (or the work of photographers such as Edward Weston). As we will see however, this formal concern with the *thing* (rather than issues of urban or rural) would serve as the heart of the Left's critique of Lorentz's films.

Lewis Mumford described the American approach as a “...stripped aesthetic, classical style...which shall embody all that is good in the machine age, its precision, its cleanliness, its hard illumination, its unflinching logic....whether regarding the old New England mill, the modern grain elevator, or the Pennsylvania barn.” This description is appropriate not only to the refined practice of the Precisionists, but to the quotidian activities of the FSA documentation crews as they made their rounds through the nation, recording the lives and conditions of a people in crisis.

The “precision” and “cleanliness” so characteristic of these images of a sometimes brutalized people has led some critics to see this formal element as a trivializing gesture and stylistic ploy in place of a rigorous and consequent aesthetic stand. But the combination of a direct, “unflinching” object-centered realism with a cool formal precision was institutionalized through the enormous scale of the federal documentation projects, and as previously mentioned, this new look quickly found its way into the broader public through an array of publications, both governmental and commercial. Particularly in a time of crisis, this latest incarnation of a historically deep visual tradition quickly emerged as part of the new vernacular: a hard-headed realism, both beautiful in its formal precision and rigorous in its confrontation of the contradictions so evident in society.

The realist turn, particularly in film, found many different expressions.<sup>25</sup> The just-mentioned avant-garde tradition, ranging from Strand and Sheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921) to Lewis Jacobs’ *City Block* (1934) and beyond, accentuated formal elements and tended to be exhibited in the film house circuit, but nevertheless frequently engaged the pro-filmic reality of urban space and life. But just as important was a more politicized tradition of documentary film, which tended to accentuate the critique of social contradictions, using visual strategies ultimately derived from newsreel productions (whether directly, or by way of the example of Soviet filmmakers such as Vertov) to communicate an all too often unseen (or unacknowledged by mainstream media) reality.<sup>26</sup> Here, the efforts of the Film and Photo League (and its iterations such as NYKINO, Frontier Films, and American Labor Films) gave voice to the struggle for organized labor, reasonable working conditions, and the basic necessities of life in crisis-torn America. Films such as *Workers’ Newsreels* (1930-32), *The Ford Massacre* (1932), *The National Hunger March*

(1931), *Pie in the Sky* (1934), and *Native Land* (1939-41) drew on the realist impulse that would also appear in FSA productions. And while they, like the avant-garde, drew upon European (and particularly Soviet) precedents for inspiration, they differed in their direct and strident advocacy of particular causes. A third tradition that deserves mention is the foundation or social agency sponsored film. Similar to the efforts of the Film and Photo League in the sense that their defining mission was to illuminate and advocate, these realist documentaries differed primarily in ideological agenda (progressive rather than revolutionary) and exhibition venue (civic clubs and churches rather than union halls and political rallies). Yet their progressive agenda would prove attractive even to leftist filmmakers who sought both better production budgets and expanded audiences, as demonstrated by *The City* (1939, sponsored by the American Institute of Planners and the Carnegie Corporation) and *Valley Town* (1940, sponsored by the Alfred Sloan Foundation).

Together, these films and filmmakers constituted a network in terms of defining a new vocabulary for expressing a clear and critical sense of the nation; in terms of articulating various aspects of a struggle to renew society; in terms of their shared interest in re-purposing the film medium to reflect upon and shape the conditions of daily life; and in terms of finding new means of production support and new sites of exhibition (since they were obviously blocked from normal theatrical distribution). The filmmakers from across these three communities – although at times fiercely divided over specific issues – *de facto* pulled together as part of a broader effort. And sometimes, as in the case of *The Plow That Broke the Plain* and *The River*, that broader effort could include particular film projects. Pare Lorenz would call upon colleagues from all three spheres to work on his films, underscoring the commonality of vision and approach which bound these groups into a network. But the coalition, for all of its common ground, would not hold.

Lorentz's films generated criticism from the left which indicates the stress-lines in the new vision of the medium which we have so far described. Indeed, some of the strongest criticism came from members of the film crew with solid credentials in the aforementioned left film organizations. Leo Hurwitz and Paul Strand, both of whom worked on *The Plow*, had two central complaints with Lorentz's approach. Perhaps predictably, they felt that he was too soft, too

absorbed in constructing an epic, in the process failing to indict capitalism in specific and unmistakable terms. But they also complained about the cinematic formalism that characterized the film, about the vernacular that had until recently bound Lorentz's vision together with their own. Hurwitz and Steiner wrote that before the depression, they had focused on "OBJECTS, THINGS...film had been depersonalized, inhuman; the THING, technique, and formal problems were supreme." But things had begun to change. Echoing the new direction evident in the Soviet Union where the formalists were under siege and "socialist realism" was the order of the day, they felt that the situation required "dramatization" and "theatricalization" of the underlying causes of the depression, and clear illustration of the problem by means of personal drama.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, their new position was at odds with Lorentz's, and since they worked together with him on the film, this difference of opinion played out on a daily basis. But even critics who held fast to the vernacular that had been established in the 1930s such as Paul Rotha complained that Lorentz's films had "no human contact" and "a lack of human beings." In this sense, it was Lorentz's insistence on the "object" (nature, water, the land) that distinguished him from, for example, the majority of the FSA photographers, who instead focused on human subjects, albeit in a formalized manner.

### **implications**

Pare Lorentz's two films emblemize the intersection of these various contextual forces. Funded as part of a New Deal initiative, both films were instrumental in forging a new image of America. On one hand, both films dealt with the nation at its most literal: the land, its forests, farmlands, and rivers; its soil and the problem of its erosion. These elements are situated both in terms of their histories (and the histories of the human interventions and policies that produced the problem) and their futures (especially the hoped for future of a collective, national vision for preservation and improvement). On the other hand, the telling of these tales plays out in the photographic style newly established as part of the American vernacular, accompanied by regional and folk melodies interwoven in Virgil Thompson's scores, with a spoken commentary

playing on region, history, and people. As such, these films are squarely positioned within the emerging national public culture.<sup>28</sup>

Lorentz's production efforts were hampered by a number of difficulties ranging from his own inexperience as a director (these were his first films), to congressional infighting which blocked the payment of funds that had been approved for the productions (forcing Lorentz to cover expenses out of his own pocket), to efforts from the ideological left, right, and even the film industry to sabotage the project. Will Hays, for example, actively blocked Lorentz from purchasing stock footage of the First World War for *The Plow*, in part perhaps because of Lorentz's biting criticisms of the Hays Office in his days as a journalist<sup>29</sup>, and in part because of the more general Hollywood objection to the federal government's involvement in film production.<sup>30</sup> And as we have noted, the film was actively boycotted from both distribution and exhibition within the domain of the studio system until the studios were threatened with redoubled anti-trust investigations.

The political context, too, provided its share of hostilities. Not surprisingly, representatives of the industrial classes, Hoover's ideological successors within the Republican Party, and the residual right so long a factor in American politics joined forces to stop Roosevelt in his tracks. The Resettlement Administration, the immediate sponsor of *The Plow*, quickly emerged as the opposition's target of choice. The RA's mission of rehabilitating farm loans, facilitating the resettlement of farmers from the most depressed areas to areas with employment opportunities, reforming the environmental practice of agriculture and forestry, and developing experimental model communities, fell on deaf ears. According to public charges put forward by the Republican National Committee, the administration's efforts to stimulate recovery and economic stability through "planned communities" was in fact sponsorship of "farm communities that are communistic in conception." *The New York Times* pointed out the relation between the RA's activities for housing settlements (as shown in *The Plow That Broke the Plain*) and "the Russian pattern." And states such as Texas always wary of encursions into their constitutional rights, actually blocked the program and its promotion through Lorentz's film.

In this context, the RA's documentation effort was seen as a purely partisan propaganda strategy. But as we have tried to suggest, its implications were more profound, reaching beyond



the specifics of a particular political message to the far more profound issue of nation-building. The administration's aggressive embrace of media such as radio, new magazines such as *Life*, public art in the form of murals and sculpture, and of course film, helped to put the diverse peoples and regions of the nation on the same wavelength. And just as importantly, through initiatives such as the FSA photo documentation project, Lorentz's films, the commissioning of music, sculpture, and murals, a new 'look' or aesthetic was established, or what we have called a national vernacular. This vernacular offered a stylistically coherent and textually specific expression of nation. This notion differed from the invocation of vulgar nationalism, instead speaking to a vision of a newly unified nation that was historically specific, self-aware, and working towards a better tomorrow. In tandem with the national reach of the new media networks, this vocabulary quickly emerged as the articulation of a new *Zeitgeist*.

The crisis in America, in part the result of its fragmentation into semi-autonomous states and its consequent inability to mobilize large-scale and systemic responses to the problems facing the whole, and in part the result of the Hoover administration's intermittent strategies of benign neglect and aggressive policing, was repositioned by Roosevelt's new vision. The nation would be united by its traditions, in touch with its regional identity, and literally bound together by a national network of film and photo documentation projects, public art, popular music, and "fireside chats". Newly available national media together with a distinct mode of representation forged both an image of a nation united, and literally helped to span the expanses of America as a geographical and cultural entity. Documentary's role in this multi-media effort was significant, for it gave added force to the visual strategies explored in FSA photography or the musical and literary initiatives to recover an authentically American voice. Moreover, it forged the nonfiction film into a tool of the nation, drawing upon the medium's capacities for expression and communication. *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River* both played an active role in the project of nation building, even as in their particulars they functioned in the partisan interests of the New Deal. The distinction rests heavily on framing, on our choice of context regarding the mobilization of historical meaning.

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We're not sure what sort of biographical information you'd like (book titles, research interests, etc?)...but to get things started, here's a short statement.

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<sup>1</sup> Some within the US government refused to even submit *The River* to the Venice Festival, fearing that the film would reveal unnecessarily the dark side of the American experience; and the film was actively blocked from consideration for an Academy Award.

<sup>2</sup> Lorentz claims that Disney's solidarity arose because he, too, had suffered at the hands of the major studios, his films having been blocked from exhibition in their theaters.

<sup>3</sup> But one example of how polarized the political scene had become: Lorentz had been a political columnist for King Features, a Hearst syndicate, until he praised the New Deal's farm policy in one of his articles. He was immediately fired by William Randolph Hearst himself. The implications of perceived political affiliation ran deep, and for many Republicans, any product of the Roosevelt administration was immediately suspect.

<sup>4</sup> Notable in this regard are Neil Lerner, *The Classical Documentary Score in American Films of Persuasion: Contexts and Case Studies, 1936-1945* (PhD Dissertation, Duke University, 1997); Paula Rabinovitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994) – Chapter 4; Robert Snyder's *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Reno: The University of Nevada Press, 1994) and Pare Lorentz, *FDR's Movie Maker: Memoirs and Scripts* (Reno: The University of Nevada Press, 1992); Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A political history of US government motion pictures* (New York: Hastings House, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> As a federation of states, the US has a long history of tension between the extremes of relative autonomy for its various states (states rights) and a strong centrist vision of a nation united (the Civil War was one such expression of the problem). Roosevelt's administration marked the emergence of a strong national model, facilitated in part through the demands of crises that were national in scope (the depression and the war), and in part through the newly available national outreach that media such as the radio made possible.

<sup>6</sup> The relationship between Hollywood and the Roosevelt administration was a particularly complicated one, as much because of the anti-trust hearings that the government was using to reform the industry, as because of the sympathy that individuals in Hollywood had for the New Deal. For more on this complicated relationship, see Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997)

<sup>7</sup> Marlene Park, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984)

<sup>8</sup> See for example Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thompson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), chapter 14.

<sup>9</sup> The success of Lorentz's films for the RA and FSA led to FDR's creation of the United States Film Service (USFS). Started in 1938 under Lorentz's direction, the USFS was terminated by the US Congress in 1940. The long-standing fear of national propaganda – a fear that the autonomy of states will be suppressed by the nation, and a fear that the partisan interests of the president will be used to sustain political power – has resulted in a prohibition against the public release of government produced media. The four years of filmmaking activities within the Agriculture Department and the USFS are in this sense quite exceptional.

<sup>10</sup> Frank S. Nugent, "The River," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1938.

<sup>11</sup> Muscio, 86.

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion of this important chapter in media and nation-building, see Robert J. Brown, *Manipulating the Ether: The Power of Broadcast Radio in Thirties America* (London: McFarland, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> The American press, then as now, was positioned right of center forcing the Roosevelt administration to find alternate ways of getting their message out. See Gary Best, *The Critical Press and the New Deal: The Press vs Presidential Power, 1933-1938* (London: Praeger, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> In Germany during this same period, this impulse took an even more distinct character, with media such as radio, loudspeakers and even television helping to construct a new Volksgemeinschaft, offering a media-enabled notion of the nation. The understanding of media common to American and German developments is as much about physical joining as it is about the rendering uniform of certain representational strategies

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<sup>15</sup> For a general overview of the New Deal built upon period documents, see William Leuchtenburg, *The New Deal, A Documentary History* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); for a general analysis see David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); T.H.Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Dixon Wecter, *The Age of the Great Depression* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975): 52.

<sup>17</sup> Resettlement Administration, Farm Security Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Project Administration, National Recovery Act

<sup>18</sup> See Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, "New Deal for Public Art," in Sally Webster and Harriet Serie, eds., *Critical Issues in Public Art* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990):128-141.

<sup>19</sup> Dedication, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (March 17, 1941). US National Archives, Section of Fine Arts, Special Bulletin, Record Group 121, entry 122

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988)

<sup>21</sup> For more on the American avant-garde of the period, see Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit und Magischer Realismus in Deutschland, 1918-1933* (Hannover: Smidt-Küsler, 1969); Sergiusz Michalski, *Neue Sachlichkeit: Malerei, Graphik, und Photographie in Deutschland, 1919-1933* (Köln: Taschen, 1992); Ute Eskildsen, "Photography and the Neue Sachlichkeit Movement," in *Germany: The New Photography 1927-1933*, ed. David Mellor (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978): 101-112.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (Bolder: Westview Press, 1990): 52.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this movement, see *Precisionism in America, 1915-1941: Reordering Reality* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994)

<sup>25</sup> See Rabinovitz, chapter 4; David Platt, *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from The Birth of a Nation to Judgment at Nuremberg* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1992)

<sup>26</sup> See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981); Thomas Waugh, "*Show Us Life*": *Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984)

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Rabinovitz, p 95.

<sup>28</sup> Yet, as conspicuous as the films were for their fixation on America, they avoided, indeed excised, the American people. One critic suggested that after devoting a film to the land, and another to water, the inevitable completion of a triad of films on the American nation required, finally, a film on the people.

<sup>29</sup> Lorentz and Morris Leopold Ernst, *Censored: The Private Life of the Movie* (New York: J. Cape and H. Smith, 1930), a highly critical account of Hollywood and the Hays Office.

<sup>30</sup> Lorentz finally obtained the needed footage through the intervention of his friend, director King Vidor.