

Evocative and Evidentiary

Interpreting the City through Non-Fiction Filmmaking

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ABSTRACT

This thesis interrogates the relationship between non-fiction film and urban discourse. It outlines intellectual and visual strategies at play in a selection of non-fiction films that actively assign meaning to the mutual influence of urban form and social processes. In so doing, I identify two overlapping traditions, the evocative and the evidentiary, which classify the applications of filmmaking to the interpretation of cities. The research focuses on two American urban planning films that represent radically different ways of organizing their visual content in order to advocate a specific kind of urban reform: *The City* (1939) by Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner and *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) by William H Whyte. Each case requires a thorough contextualization and location with urban studies, planning and film histories. The thesis, therefore, is arranged as a chronological exploration of the antecedents and turning points that explain the difference between these two films' formal strategies and philosophical positions.

My analysis begins by linking the kinetic and fragmentary qualities of modernity in art and theory to the earliest experiments in creating moving images on film. It goes on to explore in greater depth the development of a formal cinematic vocabulary for the evocation of urban space. The adaptation of evocative techniques to the political subject matter of regional planning introduces an extended historical and formal analysis of *The City* that demonstrates how it draws from the diverse elements discussed in the previous chapters and applies them to the planning agenda of Lewis Mumford and the Regional Planning Association of America. Evidentiary techniques developed as methods of resistance to the top-down planning philosophies espoused by films like *The City*; the oppositional practices that emerged during the 1960s gave rise to a mentality of learning a city through looking at it, proceeding from the particulars to the general. The pioneering film work of William H. Whyte – the most overt application of filmmaking to a specific urban planning agenda – advances this inductive position to an instrumental use of images to support empirically a series of normative goals for the form of urban public space. The thesis concludes with a call for a productive synthesis of the two modes, a proposition that include a work-process narrative of my own attempts to represent urban dynamics on video and some initial implications of filmmaking's interpretive potential for urban planners and designers. Such as synthesis, I argue, requires recuperating the ability of montage to evoke the abstract essences of urban experience while maintaining the investigative order of operations – learning through looking – of the evidentiary tradition.

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I INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A VISUAL LANGUAGE FOR URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN

A unified language appropriate to the sensory form [of cities] will be a long time developing, if indeed a unified language is possible.

– Kevin Lynch (1976)

This thesis argues for a revision to the understanding and role of time-based, visual media in the discourses that treat the relationship between social processes and urban space. My intention is to suggest ways urban planning thought and action might employ filmic strategies to their maximum effect. To do so, I will look into past strategies of using cinema to plead the case of a particular kind of urban reform. My hypothesis is that the historical disjuncture between the applied understanding of the evocative potential of cinematography and montage (which I define as framing a moving image and editing a sequence of such images) and the applied understanding of the evidentiary power of observational documentation that cinema offers has prevented urbanism from realizing the interpretive potential of the medium. Historicizing the two modes is necessary to make a case for their synthesis. In order to argue for such a synthesis, the research will unpack broader themes and assumptions embedded within the

development of urban thought over the past century and how that body of thought has represented itself through moving images.

‘Planning cinema’ (to invent a term) exists within a complex traffic in city images, but its history instantiates a microcosm of American planning discourse in the past century: its shift from large-scale, physical developments towards localized, social-scientifically informed interventions and its arrival at the current moment, which I see as a return of comprehensive macro-projects in urban policy and planning action. As the ‘big vision’ reasserts itself, a sensory/in-motion engagement with place is increasingly vital to the spatial understanding through which planning continues to justify itself as a specialized body of expertise. Planning cinema may provide a profound tool for such an endeavor.

The Plan of the Thesis

In graphing the trajectory of the relationship between urban planning and documentary film, the research will focus on two American urban planning films that represent radically different ways of organizing their visual content in order to advocate a specific kind of urban reform: *The City* (1939) by Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner and *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) by William H Whyte. Each case requires a thorough contextualization and location with urban studies, planning and film histories. The thesis, therefore, is arranged as a chronological exploration of the antecedents and turning points that explain the difference between these two films' formal strategies and philosophical positions, ending with some initial proposals for a productive synthesis of the two modes.

The story begins, in Chapter II, by linking the kinetic and fragmentary qualities of modernism in art and theory to the earliest experiments in creating moving images on film. The chapter traces how the dialectic relationship between motion and fragment ramified through Georg Simmel's sensory approach to urbanism, Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory, and Walter

Benjamin's deep belief in the interpretive potential of montage as a method of historiography. Chapter III explores in greater depth the development of a formal vocabulary for the representation of urban space on film. It begins with a formal analysis of *Manhatta*, the cinematic forebear of more famous city symphonies such as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. The critiques of this genre of urban filmmaking lead into a discussion of how the evocative technique was adapted to the political subject matter of regional planning in the New Deal films of Pare Lorentz. The planning philosophy of Rexford Tugwell is particularly relevant to the territorial and political scope these films depict. Chapter IV is an extended historical and formal analysis of *The City* that demonstrates how it draws from the diverse elements discussed in the previous chapters and applies them to the planning agenda of Lewis Mumford and the Regional Planning Association of America.

Chapter V begins with a brief analysis of the kind of film to which the success of *The City* gave rise, the problem-solving documentary. But the chapter cites the urban renewal documentary *For the Living* in order to exemplify what a growing number of urbanists were reacting against. The way the writing of

Jane Jacobs recuperates the aesthetic device of montage reflects cinematic attempts, such as *Chronicle of a Summer*, to learn the city through looking at it, to proceed from particulars toward generalizations rather than the other way around. The pioneering film work of William H. Whyte – the subject of Chapter VI – advances this inductive position to an instrumental use of images to support empirically a series of normative goals for the form of urban public space.

After historically contextualizing and analyzing the strengths and weakness of both eras of planning cinema, I argue that in order for urban planning to marshal film's potential to represent the complexity of urban experience *and* to promote urban change in the future, it must first reconcile these two approaches. To that end, Chapter VII relates my own work process narrative as I struggled to produce videos that evoked a sense of place in sixteen cities around the world. The chapter contextualizes and locates my own attempts to marry the evocative power of the former generation of city-films with the investigative observation of the latter generation. The concluding Chapter VIII offers a series of propositions for how urban planning practice can make

use of the history I have related in order to use filmmaking to its maximum effect.

In an age of increasing reliance on computer-generated moving imagery that privileges potential over reality, the capacity of live-action, montage-oriented filmmaking is to articulate the socio-spatial essences – the sense of place – in which many currents in planning thought find their basis. Whether such essences draw on broad physical elements such as scale or grain, physical details such as street width or setbacks, or social possibilities such as class or ethnic interaction, filmmaking provides a medium to express a particular sense of place in audio-visual terms. But before this capacity can be reclaimed, the history of cinema as applied to urban thought and action must be revisited.

The Cases

Both film scholars and urban historians (e.g. Soloman 1970, Wiseman 1979, Sorlin 1991, Donald 1999) have argued that cinema developed, in its formative years between 1888 and 1917, as a specifically urban art, in terms of its production, consumption and the location of the narratives it tended to

present. But the subject matter of the films of this period did not treat the city as much more than a backdrop until the 1920s, when filmmakers began to reflect the modernist fascination with and unease about the city (Gold and Ward 2000). Throughout the interwar years, avant-garde cinema (both non-fiction and fiction, European and American) meditated on the city as a subject in its own right, offering a wide variety of intellectual, political and visual interpretations of the relationship between the physical form and the social reality of urban life. The city-films of this period – especially the sub-genre of city-symphonies – isolate and juxtapose images of urban actions and interactions to illuminate the dynamic, plural, yet ultimately coherent essences of cities despite the social disparities and fragmentation within them. As such, they succeed in representing their chosen cities as “legible”. Meanwhile, the growing corpus of documentary films was involved in developing a set of polemical strategies to frame and address issues of social justice attendant to the socio-economic polarization of the 1920s and 30s. In 1939, Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke’s *The City* screened before a captivated audience at the New York World’s Fair, representing a merger of these two traditions in an effort to present the problems of congested

American cities and advocate for the alternative of the planned garden city. In making its argument for the role of planning to reshape modern life, the film employed many of the formal techniques of avant-garde city-symphonies as well as Soviet socialist realist documentaries. Other documentaries on the need for urban planning followed (Gold and Ward 2000), but *The City* represents the marshalling of a wide variety of filmic techniques to pursue an agenda of urban reform. Yet, neither film studies nor urban studies literature has adequately explored the connection between those city-films that identified themselves as representing the city within an artistic tradition and those city-films that concerned themselves primarily with advocating for urban change.

The overlap of formal strategies shared by these two types of films in the 1930s explains why they were considered, by scholars and lay-viewers alike, as significant additions to a growing discourse of urbanism. Yet, in the decades since, these two traditions have diverged. The cinematic exploration of the city has migrated from non-fiction to fiction genres, specifically film noir (Krutnik 2000) and science fiction (Jenkins 2001). And the

use of film-based methods in urban planning has increasingly eschewed the overtly subjective techniques of narrative cinema. Instead, it has preferred to treat film as a transparent instrument to convey empirical data on the use of space. As the transformative (and invasive) power of planning held itself to be self-evident in the postwar years, the profession moved away from making a case for itself in audio-visual terms. And when alternatives to large-scale urban planning interventions began to appear in the 1960s, filmmaking re-emerged as a viable means to question existing approaches to intervention. These new uses of film methods capitalized on emerging technologies that allowed for amateur film production that was lightweight and low-cost. Suddenly, community organizers and activists had a new arsenal with which to attack the top-down, destructive nature of mainstream physical planning by proving its incompatibility with social practices. William H Whyte's *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) is the most famous and successful of these attempts. It arranges ten years worth of time-lapse photography and direct filmic observation of the use of public space to challenge cities to be more responsive to demonstrated human need. The benefit of this approach was a multiplicity of new eyes, new perspectives,

on the city. Yet, the political impulse of such endeavors prioritized film's evidentiary power to convey a semblance of objective fact over its evocative power to represent a complex urban character.

Taking *The City* (1939) and *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980) as points of departure, this thesis will interrogate the disjuncture between stylized representations of urban space and sociological investigations of urban problems. *The City* reveals a deep faith in cinema's power to organize its viewers' reaction to the social conditions of the physical world around them. In terms of specifically urban cinema, the film epitomizes this belief. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* demonstrates film's ability to present observable phenomena in order to provoke action. In exploring these approaches, I will attempt to explain how the shift from one to the other reflects the evolving understanding of the role film-based methods can play in instigating a reaction to urban space and society. It will tease out why urban planning discourse has, in engaging film, turned away from narrative strategies and moved towards social-scientific methods. And it will make the case that in order for urban planning to engage

more constructively with film-based methods in the future, it must reclaim film's evocative power while retaining its ability to demonstrate observable phenomena. Only when the two approaches are reconciled will urban planning theory and practice be able to capitalize on the promise of filmmaking to reinvigorate the representation of place intrinsic to any intelligent intervention in urban space.

Towards a New Visual Language of Urban Planning

Every urban plan tells a story about a place. Sometimes the story is about the need to change a given site's existing conditions – the relationship of its form to its context or to the prescription of activities and intensities of its use. Sometimes, the story is about protecting the site from external forces acting upon it.

Sometimes, the story is about the need to enact change upon a larger spatial scale through a concentrated transformation of a small part of it. In all cases, the urban plan – whether its basis lies in economic development policy, environmental regulation or physical design – reflects the planner's interpretation of the relationship between the present context and the future potential of the site in question. That relationship is dynamic, as even the

most radical intervention involves the maintenance of certain extant qualities, the transformation of others, and the creation of new ones. Yet the (visual) tools to describe it within mainstream planning practice are static. For the most part, they reflect the formal legacy of an architectural language within urban planning practice: the figure/ground, the plan and elevation, the perspective, the still photograph. Graphic projections that describe multiple points-of-view, such as axonometrics, do so to counter the distortions of perspective by using accurate length dimensions and, therefore, represent space outside of observable experience. The current vogue of three-dimensional animated fly-throughs, while kinetic, again eschews human perceptual possibility in its presentation of a potential future arrangement of built forms. This inheritance of a drawn, architectural language is awkward and often incommensurate with the representational difficulties that cities present. Sections, plans and elevations may describe all necessary information about a building, but lack the descriptive potential to convey urban complexity. To expand the methodology of the architectural section from the building to the urban scene requires, among other conceits, exaggerating the heights of buildings in order to convey any sense of configuration

that reflects actual environmental experience. Photography offers the potential to imbue subjective visual interpretations of place with a verisimilitude removed from the authorship of the designer. But it is no less static a representation. Similarly, non-visual tools of urban planning, such as policy memoranda and prose descriptions, are often no more than snapshots of a particular set of propositions and assumptions frozen in a particular time and closed to the interpretation of stakeholders outside of the planning process.

In *What Time Is This Place?*, Kevin Lynch shows us the primacy of time within the urban phenomenon. While social philosophers such as Henri Lefebvre were fostering a 'spatial turn' in critical theory by exposing the theoretical limitations of a historical, and therefore anchored in the temporal, approach to human experience, Lynch was cautioning against the forced separation of spatial and temporal understandings of urban form and social life. He relates the traces of the past visible in the present to the rhythms and paces of activity that make cities dynamic. Time-based media, such as cinema, cannot approximate the temporal complexities of city life nor can they transport such essences to

an audience absented from the object of cinematic study; filmmaking is by no means a transparent instrument to convey information. Rather, it can interpret them through authorial choices. While Lynch's project is certainly not to expand the role of filmmaking, he does implicate the technological and artistic processes the medium offers as indicative of our age:

Of all the arts, film is perhaps the most instructive for us since its material basis is visible change... It accommodates movement in both time and space, in relation to an observer who is himself moving and changing. In film, time can be accelerated or decelerated, reversed or dwelt upon, vaulted in either direction. Each of these distortions evokes powerful emotions in the observer. Unlike literature, there are no explicit tenses or temporal conjunctions... As in environmental design, the potential dimensions of film are rich and complicated: color, light, form, movement, narrative, sound, dialogue (Lynch 1976:167).

For Lynch, the absence of a codified filmic grammar is what allows film to manipulate audio-visual information to express complex spatio-temporal conditions. For the purposes of his discussion, the primary urban condition that film can help us explore is environmental change. While the metaphors that give this quality of cinema a vocabulary come from the literary analysis of language, its potential for urban discourse comes from another

temporal art: music. The dimension that I find conspicuously absent from conventional forms of urban analysis is rhythm. But in charting new territory for film to interrogate, we must not forget its established capacity to explore space.

Richard Sennett's *The Conscience of the Eye* begins by recalling the Ancient Greek capacity to *see* complexity. The contribution filmmaking can make is to provide access to that complexity. Filmmaking is the arrangement of fragments to orchestrate resonances of complexity. Moving images are parts that, when well made, speak for the whole. Yet filmmaking is not about creating false unities or suggesting facile totalities – on the contrary, filmmaking celebrates the partial and thematizes the fragmentary. But while this arrangement can speak to temporal qualities, each fragment, each shot, is a spatial description. As such, the analytical tools available to discuss the shot as the basic unit of the film borrow from our understanding of other plastic arts – composition, texture, pattern, shape, line, etc. Art historical conventions of formal analysis, however, become insufficient when motion is introduced: "Photography had introduced the power to reproduce a body, offering an image equal to our

physical body. Film made it move" (Bruno 2002:22). The capacities of cinema to interpret space and time are not discrete. According to Lincoln Johnson, "Filmic space is created, described, and infused with import by the real or imagined movement, both within the frame and from shot to shot, movement that inevitably incorporates time. Movement in turn derives its particular expressive quality from the spatial configurations it generates and the amount of time it occupies" (Johnson 1974:84). Art historian Erwin Panofsky puts it another way: he identifies the two principal formal elements that distinguish film from other art forms as the "dynamization of space and, accordingly, spatialization of time" (Barsam 1992:58). Therefore, we must resist the temptation to ascribe filmmaking the potential to unify the theoretical positions that treat either the spatial or the temporal as primary to phenomenologies of the urban. Rather, filmmaking can assert the inextricability of space and time, and through the creation of new texts that tease out such urban essences as rhythm or perspective, film can provide a new mode of spatio-temporal interpretation.

II MOTION AND FRAGMENT: EARLY CINEMA, MONTAGE AND THE BIRTH OF URBAN STUDIES

Given man's power of memory, the existence of two facts in juxtaposition prompts their correlation; no sooner do we begin to recognize this correlation than a composition is born and its ideas begin to assert themselves.

–Vsevolod Meyerhold (1969)

In his introduction to his anthology of *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, Richard Sennett posits that the reason urban studies emerges as a specific body of thought only in the early twentieth century, after millennia of urban civilization, is that “up to the time of the Industrial Revolution, the city was taken by most social thinkers to be the image of society itself, and not some special, unique form of social life” (1969:3). At the turn of the twentieth century, some seventy-five years after the first throes of massive industrial change in urban society, German scholars such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel turned their attentions to unpacking how the new modes of capitalism, labor and social organization reformulated the “experience of time, motion and human relatedness” (Sennett 1969:4). The invention of cinema concurs with this initial phase of urban scholarship. Moreover, the medium’s construction of time and motion are what distinguish it, ontologically and epistemologically, from other

forms of representation (Bruno 2002; Uricchio 2007)¹. Therefore, the immediate attention early cinema paid to specifically urban subject matter is not accidental. Rather, it reflects a set of academic and artistic concerns with how the new order – an order wrought by the coming of modern-industrial modes of capitalism and most evident in cities – should be investigated. The relationship between the development of a scholarly urbanism and early cinema’s response to the city is more coincident than causal. But the synchronicity underscores the shift in the understanding of the role of visual perception in social analysis; it highlights the importance of sensory, particularly visual, inputs in defining those reformulations of ‘time, motion and human relatedness’ that the city presented at the turn of the twentieth century.

¹ Bruno focuses on film’s capacity to render motion, while Uricchio focuses on its construction of time as definitional.

This chapter takes the earliest attempts to incorporate the new understanding of time and motion into representational forms, in art and scholarship, as its point of departure. The earliest examples of cinema and the earliest examples of urban studies demonstrate the kinetic quality of modern life, to be sure, but also its fragmentary nature. In the capacity to accommodate both the kinetic and the fragmentary, I will argue, lies cinema's power to represent urban experience. The seminal theorist of the city, Georg Simmel, employs a mode of social analysis that attempts to bring theoretical coherence to the urban scale through an embrace of the speed, congestion and fleeting interactions that characterize the metropolis. The seminal theorist of the cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, advances a theory of creating symbolic meaning through the juxtaposition of partial images in order to construct a representational whole more powerful than any single image could produce. Locating both in their historical and theoretical contexts – an intellectual constellation that includes the invention of cinema and the art of the Russian Revolution along with Marx, Baudelaire and Benjamin – provides a necessary framework to understand the disjuncture between the evocative and the evidentiary in urban moving images.

Many historians refer to the period between 1875 and 1914 as the Second Industrial Revolution in an effort to prioritize the development of Germany and the USA specifically and to expand the historical understanding of industrialization outward from an exclusive focus on Great Britain (see Britannica 2007; Hobsbawm 1999). Industrialized Britain, however, continued to innovate in this period. Since the location of the conceptual relationship between film and the city so quickly migrated to the centers of cinematic production, depiction and consumption that emerged in Los Angeles, Paris and London, the surprising sites of cinema's invention are easy to forget: West Orange, New Jersey; Lyon, France and Leeds, England.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Leeds was known as 'the city that made everything.' The textile industries² that built the town had given way to heavy manufacturing and leather, and the city's population had grown in a century from 30,000 to 177,000 (Lambert 2006). The promise of innovative work in technology

² Leeds and its famous woolen manufacture sector figured largely in Friedrich Engels' research into the *Condition of the Working Classes in England*; Karl Marx refers to the famous 1786 petition of Wool Workers of Leeds, who rallied against the loss of livelihoods to the new technologies of flax spinning.



II.1 *Leeds Bridge (1888)* is one of the first known moving images recorded on film. Le Prince composed the shot to focus attention on the kinetic rhythms of mobility in industrial Leeds.

Still (above) from <http://www.lumen.org.uk/evolution2007/graphics/05-11.jpg>

Film strip (left) from <http://www.mylearning.org/learning/lo-uis-le-prince>

development was enough to attract young, French inventor Louis Augustin Le Prince to this bustling city to work on expediting valve production for a brass foundry in 1866. In his spare time, he experimented with everything from affixing photographic emulsions to metal to creating a sixteen-lens motion picture camera. The foundry where he worked still stands in the busiest and oldest part of the city (Rawlence 1990:239), a few hundred yards north of where the Leeds Bridge crosses the River Aire, connecting the factories and docks to the commercial sector and railway station.

In October 1888 – three years before Thomas Edison's first patent for his *kinetograph* and seven years before the Lumiere brothers' Paris exhibition – Le Prince placed a film camera he had invented in the foundry window at the busiest moment of the day and pointed it at the crowded scene on Leeds Bridge. He filmed a three-second sequence showing pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages and carts traversing the river bridge (see image II.1). According to Stephen Barber, "The seminal film image forms an exploration of the city designed to capture the maximum intensity of urban life and its actions"; Le Prince selected that moment and site in order to "saturate the image with the greatest possible accumulation of human movement" (2002:17-18).

The variety and density of human movement visible outside the foundry window are apt metonyms for the speed and intensity of the Second Industrial Revolution that helped catalyze the development of modernism in literature and the visual arts (see Schleifer 2000). But the impulse to represent the fast-changing world also fits within a quest for realism³ in nineteenth-century cultural production that "was provoked not by religion or ideology, but rather by an abandonment of ideology, by the idea that nature represented not universal beliefs, but *visible phenomena*" (Barsam 1992: 13; emphasis added).

The term 'modernism' (as period or meta-style) is broad and contentious. Yet across the spectrum of modernist projects, scholars identify a politics, poetics and aesthetics of the *new*, the *in-motion*: artists and theorists of the mid- to late-nineteenth century found the need for a profound break with the past and a

³ The realist impulse also required confronting such challenges as post-Newtonian, subatomic physics. In this last area, the very premise that knowledge could be derived from observation found itself under threat: in the 1890s controversy of whether the basic material of the universe behaved like waves or particles, "there was no direct observation" (Bell 1999:11)

conceptual embrace of constant movement (See Weston 1996; Bell 1999; Schleifer 2000). This reorientation involved a reckoning with intellectual antecedents as diverse as Marx's hermeneutical exposure of the privileged classes' justification of their own condition (Berman 1985; Bell 1999) and Baudelaire's poetic illumination of "*le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent*"⁴ in metropolitan life (Benjamin 1968; see also Frisby 1986). For Marx {1848}, the confrontation with flux is the disintegration of "All fixed, fast-frozen relationships... [while] all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" (as cited in Berman 1985). While for Baudelaire {1863}, this transient "beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners" (1965:1) only constitutes "the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (1965:13). Both positions share the call for new forms of analysis and representation capable of rendering the momentary mobility of modern, urban life.

⁴ Baudelaire's oft-quoted definition of *modernité* is alternately translated as "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent" (in Uricchio 2007) and "the transitory, the fleeting, the fortuitous" (in Frisby 2004).

Two years after Le Prince first captured the urban concatenation of infrastructure, transportation and human movement on film, he booked passage to America to secure an American patent for his machine and to display the first moving pictures to an American audience. Before making this journey, he boarded a train for Paris to clear up some family business and disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again. Authorities in three countries suspected foul play (especially since the prototype camera he was carrying also disappeared), and until her death, his wife suspected that agents of Thomas Edison murdered him to protect Edison Labs' claim to have invented cinema (Rawlence 1990). The mystery remains unsolved.

Cinema, like photography before it, is the child of many fathers. Entering the debate of whether Le Prince's camera in Leeds, or Edison Labs' *kinetoscope* in West Orange, NJ, or the Lumieres' *cinematograph* in Lyon, or the Skladanowsky Brothers' *bioskop* in Berlin, or Eadweard Muybridge's *zoopraxiscope* in San Francisco, was the first device to record a moving image is unproductive and unnecessary. But the multiplicity of inventors involved in the technology's appearance in the final decade of the nineteenth

century attests to the diversity of impulses that led to its development. For Edison, innovation was an end in itself, and one that had motivated some of the greatest inventions of the age. For the Lumieres, the inheritance of a family photography business required consistent investment in new technologies to remain competitive in the crowded industry of commercial portraiture (Barsam 1992). For the Skladanowskys, a lifelong fascination with pre-cinematic spectacles such as magic lanterns inspired their desire to create a new kind of pre-recorded performative entertainment (Barber 2002). And for Muybridge, the impulse was to develop an experimental method to analyze the physiology and mechanics of animal movement (Cresswell 2006). Le Prince, however, is a more mysterious figure. We know he studied painting in Paris, chemistry and optics in Leipzig, and spent his twenties traveling and photographing Europe (Rawlence 1990), from which a circumstantial (and tenuous) case could be made that his work reflects a desire to provide new tools for interpreting, with an artist's insight and a scientist's observational skills, the visible world. His untimely vanishing rescinded his place in cinematic history and precluded serious biographical inquiry into his motivations. But, perhaps his

absence from the history of cinema's genesis and its early canon is a productive obfuscation. The mystery of his disappearance echoes the difficulty of articulating a single and exclusive purpose for cinema. The tension and overlap between the functions of documentation, spectacle/entertainment and scientific experimentation speaks to the medium's infinite possibility.

The year that Le Prince went missing, Georg Simmel published *Über soziale Differenzierung* (English title: *On Social Differentiation*), his first major work⁵. Simmel would go on to be the first social theorist to chart a theoretical space for the city as a cohesive object of study, but in earlier work, his intellectual agenda is to extend and critique the organicist and positivist theories of emergent sociological thought⁶ aligned with Herbert Spencer and August Comte. Spencer's Social Darwinism applies the laws of

⁵ 1890 was a seminal year for modernism: James George Frazer introduced the non-theological and comparative study of religion with the publication of *The Golden Bough*; in literature, Henrik Ibsen, the 'father of modern drama' finished *Hedda Gabler*.

⁶ Positivism has meant different things to different authors; I am referring to what Giddens (1974) refers to as the belief that "the methodological procedures of natural science may be directly adapted to sociology" and that human subjectivity is not an insurmountable obstacle precluding the development of laws or law-like generalizations about the nature of social relations.

nature to society (see Hofstadter 1944) while Comte – to whom the coining of the term 'sociology' is attributed – is among the first to apply the scientific method to the investigation of social life (Acton 1951). Simmel distinguishes himself from this tradition by advocating a 'philosophical sociology' that interprets history and society generally, that issues a call to intellectual action that no strictly empirical disciplinary tools could answer (see Geser [2007] and Coser 1977). The distinction between scientific method and the method implicit in Simmel's phenomenological reading⁷ of the urban will become important in historicizing the disjuncture between evocative montage and evidentiary moving-image data.

The critique of positivism might seem to periodize Simmel – as an exponent of experience, as a scholar in search of new forms of social analysis to address the paradigm shift of post-Enlightenment thinking during the Second Industrial Revolution – as a representative of a phase of philosophical inquiry altogether distinct to that of Auguste Comte. But such a

⁷The contribution of Simmel's philosophies of history to phenomenology is often overlooked, but recent attempts to redress this error are gaining ground (See Owsley and Backhaus 2003 and Backhaus 2003).

distinction belies the lasting influence of the Comtian tradition on urbanism, specifically in articulating the role of the state in urban interventions. In his penetrating intellectual history of urban planning, John Friedmann (1987) identifies Comte's strict positivism with the 'social reform' tradition of planning theory, whose origins he ascribes to Comte's mentor Saint-Simon and whose lineage he traces to New Deal American planner Rexford Tugwell. (Perhaps surprisingly, Tugwell re-emerges repeatedly in the story of urban and regional planning cinema.) The social reform tradition constitutes a pillar of planning thought, and reminds us that the modernist impulse in art and social theory is only one of many forebears of 'planning cinema'. The tension between Simmel's "sociology of the senses" and Comte's "science of society" reverberates throughout urban social theory. The new subject matter of post-Enlightenment cultural production, in art and scholarship, demonstrates an important link between the nascent social investigation of urban life and early cinematic responses to the urban landscape.

In "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), Simmel links the psychological mechanisms the urban citizen develops to a density

of diverse experiences, juxtaposed. The city forces each inhabitant to confront its speed and intensity, its complexity of interpersonal interaction, and "the process of building defenses against the city inevitably molds the identity of the man doing the building" (Sennett 1969:9). As we have seen, the idea that the urban condition could be qualitatively different from the non-urban was new. And for Simmel, the urban condition is a state of *mind*, social-psychological in nature, as opposed to structural and exclusively symptomatic of modern capitalism as it is in Weber's account (Sennett 1969). While Simmel's broader project – to celebrate sensate subjectivity within sociological method – required reference to all manner of sensory inputs, he articulates his argument in visual terms.

Man is a differentiating creature. His mind is stimulated by the difference between a momentary impression and the one which preceded it. Lasting impressions use up, so to speak, less consciousness than does *the rapid crowding of changing images*, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing conditions which the metropolis creates (Simmel in Miles et al 2000:12; emphasis added).

He discusses experience via its optic metonyms, 'the image' and 'the glance', as well as its psychological one, 'the impression', without ever offering an example of one such image. So while the

language may be visual, the theoretical emphasis is on the change, the ‘sharp discontinuity’, between images, rather than any one image in particular. And the modifiers that qualify the mobile ephemerality of urban sense-data privilege, once again, speed and congestion: ‘rapid’, ‘crowding’, ‘changing’ and ‘onrushing’.

David Frisby, a scholar who has immersed himself in what he calls Simmel’s ‘sociological impressionism’, re-asserts the debt Simmel⁸ owes to Baudelaire’s initial definition of *modernité*, given Simmel’s concern with and appreciation of “the discontinuous experience of time, space and causality as transitory, fleeting and fortuitous or arbitrary” (1985:4). He cites a contemporaneous reviewer of Simmel’s *Soziologie* who makes this connection all the more overt: “Modernity has found here a dynamic expression: the totality of fragmentary, centrifugal directions of existence and the arbitrariness of individual elements are brought to light. In contrast, the concentric principle, the monumental element is not attained” (as cited in Frisby 1985:39). For Frisby, following an idea introduced by Lukács in his obituary of Simmel, “the key to

⁸ In his excellent book *Fragments of Modernity* (1985), Frisby also associates Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, two scholars whose work is much more overtly influenced by the potential of cinema, to Baudelaire.

Simmel’s work as a whole is an impressionistic aestheticisation of reality” (1981:10).

Simmel goes on to relate the metropolitan mental condition to the pecuniary culture of urban life. But the risks and opportunities that the capitalist order concentrates in cities continue to manifest themselves, in Simmel’s view, through the juxtaposition of impressions related to different rhythms of activity, different networks of economic and cultural transaction, and different images presenting themselves in unexpected ways. The description of this experiential congestion evokes an urban experience resistant to the reductiveness of static forms of representation. The sense of motion and the complexity of multiple, momentary interactions are paramount. The dynamic qualities of modern, urban experience require modes of representation that are not just visual, but kinetic.

I find Simmel’s work to evince a sensory turn in social analysis, and in so doing refracts urban social relations through the modern lens of mobility, of momentary experience. Like the hypothetical painter of modern life that Baudelaire invokes,

Simmel thematizes and aestheticizes the fragmentary and the fleeting. His project accepts that the sum total of what is seen cannot be seized. In the modern world, in both art and scholarship, parts must speak for the whole. As such, Simmel's project involves the "collection of snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*, fragmentary attempts to capture the timeless essence of social reality in fleeting moments of social interaction" (Oakes 1983:1041). Finding the essential in the ephemeral; capturing 'snapshots' of 'fleeting moments of social interaction' and assembling them into a coherent interpretive comment of sociological insight: what could be more cinematic? Indeed, Simmel's work prefigures the cinematic technology that does exactly that: montage.

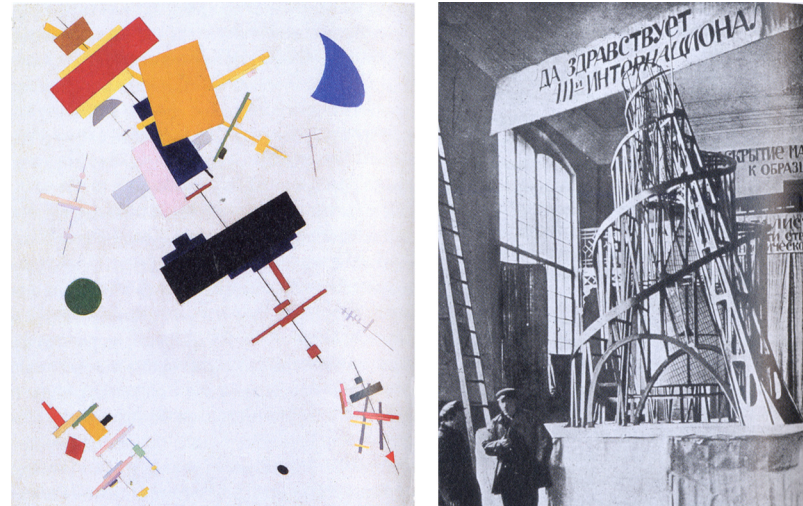
A tension exists between the need for modes of analysis and representation able to render the kinetic qualities of urban life and those able to encapsulate its fragmentary qualities. The modern acceleration of urban motion, even when conducted through the irregular and congested rhythms of Simmel's metropolis, implies a certain fluidity of perception. Whereas, the fragments that comprise modern urban experience are, by nature,

discontinuous. The aspects of Baudelaire's tripartite definition of *modernité* are not necessarily or obviously mutually reconcilable. The fin-de-siècle search for an intellectual vocabulary to analyze and represent the modern had to treat both motion and fragment.

I believe cinema has the power to provide that vocabulary. But the temptation to conceptualize cinema exclusively in the terms of the former – motion – must be resisted. The temptation is strong: the word cinema is derived from the Greek *kinema* for 'movement' and *kinein* for 'to move'; the English 'motion pictures' or 'movies' retains the primacy of movement in defining the medium. But the technologies of capturing motion, while foundational, are only part of the story. The assembly of individual moving pictures into a sequence – what I will refer to as montage – is, to my mind, essential to cinema's capacity to represent the urban condition. For in this technology, cinema embraces the kinetic *and* the fragmentary. In so doing, cinema not only embodies Baudelaire's '*transitoire, fugitif, and contingent*', it fuses them.

As Baudelaire's definition ramified through art and social theory in the first decades of the twentieth century, the work of modernism's other progenitor, Karl Marx, was inspiring political revolution. In Russia, the Bolsheviks called upon artists to serve the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the institutions of the early Soviet Union did not fear experimentation in the arts, as long as the end goal of such art-making was to support the revolutionary agenda (see Mally 1990). Much of the Russian avant-garde in the decade leading up to the Russian Revolution was heavily influenced by Futurism, but that movement's inherent snobbery and claims of supremacy proved inconsistent with the goals of Soviet society. Some former Futurists, such as Kasimir Malevich, maintained a non-ideological and apolitical ideal for artistic practice⁹. Others, led by the sculptor Vladimir Tatlin, argued for the application of avant-garde techniques toward the development of a collectivist class art (see image II.2). Art historians credit Tatlin with founding Constructivism (Weston 1996). This pro-revolutionary art movement was instrumental in pushing the definition of 'montage' beyond a philosophically

⁹ Malevich argued this position to his detriment: under Stalin, he was persecuted as a maker of bourgeois art; many works were confiscated or destroyed.



II.2 Both Malevich's *Supremus No. 56* (1916; left) and Tatlin's model for the unbuilt *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20; right) used the juxtaposition of dissimilar forms and materials – constructivist montage – to advance a radical aesthetics and politics, respectively. The influence of both will re-emerge in the story of urban visual representation via the contemporary architectural vision of Zaha Hadid.

Images from Celant and Ramirez-Montagut 2006.

neutral method of collage and towards a key theoretical component of the new social analysis that both modern-industrial capitalism and its socialist alternative demanded (Bordwell 1972). Russian Constructivism, in formal terms, generally refers to non-representational relief construction and sculpture fashioned from the juxtaposition of dissimilar industrial materials, but its prevailing ethos of industrial progress and proletarian action cut

across all the arts, from painting to literature. Tatlin's colleague, the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, founded the influential Constructivist journal of the LEF, or Left Front for the Arts, in 1923 and proclaimed, in the premiere issue, "We have now swept away the dust of verbal antiquity and shall only make use of fragments" (as cited in Reavey and Slonim 1934:399). Such artists found in montage a techno-visual avatar of Marxist (and Hegelian) thinking: montage was to be the dialectic made visible.

The word montage, in general usage, means the juxtaposition of various images to form a continuous whole. As such, the word is indistinct from film editing or from assembling various still images to create a single, composite image. In cinematic terms, the word has (at least) two distinct meanings. The first refers to a theory of developing meaning through the sequencing of moving images, as developed by Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, who believed that 'montage' (the juxtaposition of diverse images through film editing) could create an idea or an impact not found in the individual images. Two or more images together create a "*tertium quid*" (third thing) that makes the whole greater than the sum of its constituent parts. For Eisenstein,

cinema's seminal theorist (see Antoine-Dunne 2004) the promise of this phenomenon to influence an audience "*in the desired direction* through a series of calculated pressures on its psyche" was deterministic, political, and revolutionary: cinema is, for him, "a factor for exercising emotional influence over the masses" (Eisenstein 1924:35; emphasis in text). And montage was the technique identified to distinguish cinema from other art forms and to situate it uniquely in order to realize its revolutionary potential.

The second meaning of the term has evolved over time, as narrative, commercial cinema eclipsed all other forms. Montage, in this sense, is a specific kind of film sequence that collapses time and/or space and subverts the continuity of the film's diegetic reality. The device is usually used to interrupt or accelerate the viewer's understanding of narrative time, through the use of a disconnected image track often unified by a single sound track.

Both meanings incorporate and expand on the technical definition of the term, in which montage is coterminous with film

editing: it is the arrangement of moving images into a sequence. As such, Eisenstein scholars such as Geoffrey Nowell-Smith remind us not to romanticize the word or imbue it with mystical powers, for it is “the ordinary word for film editing in French and in Russian (*montazh*), Italian (*montaggio*) and Spanish (*montaje*). *Chaine de montage* is the French phrase for a factory assembly line” (1991:xiii). Soviet film theorists had already established editing as the defining characteristic of cinema (that distinguishes it from theater, literature or visual art and recommends its use in the service of politics) before Eisenstein expounded upon it. In 1919, Lev Kuleshov demonstrated the primacy of montage with the now famous Kuleshov Effect experiment. Kuleshov edited a short film in which identical shots of the expressionless face of a Tsarist-era movie star are alternated with various other shots, such as a bowl of soup, a pretty girl, or a child’s coffin. The test subject audience believed the actor’s expression was different each time, depending on whether he was ‘looking at’ the soup, the girl, or the coffin, showing an expression of hunger, lust or grief respectively. The relative importance of the *combination* of shots, as opposed to the *composition* of any individual shot, has remained sacrosanct within film studies ever since. Montage, after

all, is cinema’s essence: “For the exposition of even the simplest phenomena cinema needs juxtaposition (by means of a consecutive, separate presentation) between the elements which constitute it: montage... is fundamental to cinema, deeply grounded in the conventions of cinema and the corresponding characteristics of perception” (Eisenstein 1925:35).

Eisenstein, an avowed communist, wanted explicitly to create a ‘class cinema’ that would shock the worker into action. But Soviet acceptance of an experimental vanguard in the arts was not to outlast the 1920s. Stalin’s regime increasingly tightened restrictions on any artistic expression that fell afoul of the official artistic doctrine of socialist realism, and it eventually banned Soviet ‘montage cinema’ as a dangerous example of Formalism in the arts. Years later (in an 1970 interview for a French film magazine), Kuleshov made ambitious, if grandiose, claims about the connection of montage to politics: “We were very young, we wanted to know everything; we thought, we argued... We had the revolution, which, despite difficulties, gave us these possibilities. It liberated man, thought, and the artists who, under the czar and before, had been stifled. The time of montage had come. It had

to be discovered. It was inevitable” (as cited in Bordwell 1972). Kuleshov’s use of montage, however, was principally for narrative ends. Eisenstein’s use relied on more ambitious metaphorical associations, and whether montage was the necessary outcome of a combination of political and artistic forces or not, it required years of philosophical reflection and exposition. His many writings employ montage to elucidate a wide range of philosophical issues from mimesis to dialectics to the “materialist approach to form” (see Taylor 1999) and enumerate a five-part classification system¹⁰. Moreover, each of his sixteen films pushes the limits of what meanings the practice could bear. The expansive philosophical scope of Eisenstein’s intellectual ambition meant that he resists, for the most part, engagement with the potential of montage to treat any particular subject matter – such as urbanism – other than through a broad political lens of class struggle. But a ca. 1937 article called “Montage and Architecture” is particularly relevant to our discussion. Film scholar Giuliana Bruno locates this “pioneering meditation on film’s architectonics” as “pivotal” to tracing the

¹⁰ For detailed definitions of Eisenstein’s typology of montage (Metric, Rhythmic, Tonal, Overtonal and Intellectual) please see Eisenstein’s *Film Sense* (1942).

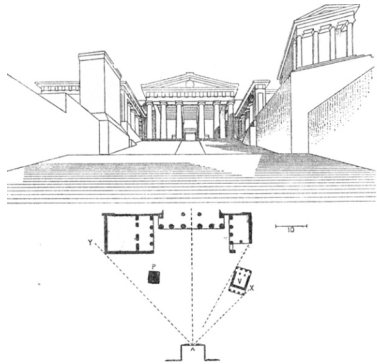
interaction between film and architecture (2002:55). Art historian Yve-Alain Bois is more specific: he discusses the essay as a key step in the development of mobile and multiple human perspectives in architectural representation that links cinematography to the rise of axonometry (1989:114-116). I would go even further. For me, Eisenstein’s essay moves beyond linking cinematic and architectural representational forms (the shot and the rendering) and towards charting a theoretical space in which the critical trajectories of montage and urbanism intersect and, crucially, inform each other.

Eisenstein begins his essay with a discussion of the word ‘path’. He argues that a shift has occurred from a past in which a spectator’s cognitive path referred to his movement “through a series of carefully disposed phenomena which he absorbed *in order* with his visual sense” to a present in which the mind’s path proceeds “across a multiplicity of phenomena, far apart in time and space, gathered in a certain sequence into a single meaningful concept; diverse impressions passing in front of an immobile spectator” (1991:59; emphasis added). He illustrates the former mode through reference to children’s drawings, wherein a single

picture contains multiple viewpoints, and to architectural renderings from fifteenth century Russia that combine plan and elevation such that “the path is a movement across the *plan*, while the frontal views of the buildings are shown in *elevation*, seen from specific points on the plan” (Ibid, emphasis in text). Architecture, as opposed to painting, Eisenstein asserts, is cinema’s “undoubted ancestor.” The modern bourgeois examples of the latter have “remained incapable of fixing the total representation of a phenomenon in its full visual multi-dimensionality” while the Classical Greek examples of the former have “left us the most perfect examples of shot design, change of shot and shot length.” He then quotes at length from a passage from Auguste Choisy’s *Histoire de l’architecture* that describes the experience of a third-person spectator walking among the buildings of the Acropolis of Athens. This ancient urban arrangement of built forms is, for

Eisenstein, “the perfect example of one of the most ancient films” and, following Choisy’s peripatetic method of formal analysis, “it is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot than the one which our legs create by walking among the buildings of the acropolis” (Eisenstein {ca. 1937} 1991:59-60).

The cinematic qualities that Eisenstein finds in this experiential description of the Acropolis relate to Choisy’s prose juxtapositions of architectural views of various distances, perspectives and compositions in which the perceived visual hierarchy of formal elements conveys specific architectonic meanings. For example, when Choisy’s spectator observes the Propylaea, the unevenness of the plan view recedes in importance

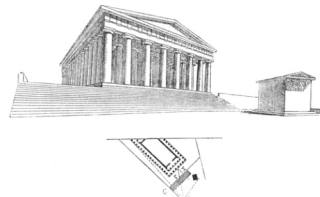


beneath a visual experience in which “the optical symmetry is impeccable.” Just past the Propylaea, the spectator comes across the following *mise-en-scène*:

In the foreground there towers the statue of Athene Promachos; the Erechtheum and the Parthenon are in the background, so that the whole of this first panorama is subordinated to the statue, which is its central point and creates an impression of unity. The Parthenon only acquires its significance when the visitor loses sight of this gigantic piece of sculpture (Choisy {1899} as quoted in Eisenstein {1937} 1991:63; see image II.3).



Eisenstein sketches the ‘montage effect’ of the particular combination of views that Choisy presents and uses this sequence to advance his argument about the symbolic power of a specifically architectural syntax for the order of cinematic images. The fact that Eisenstein exemplifies the hereditary link between montage cinema and Classical architecture with a group of buildings rather than a single structure is significant. In both composition and juxtaposition, Choisy’s images prioritized the arrangement of and visual relationships between multiple physical forms. Before hastening to identify an urbanistic, as opposed to architectural, orientation in the essay, however, we must remember that the social interaction that defines the urban, in my view, is absent. Yet, the choice of Choisy’s particular art-historical method – one that draws its explanatory power from the experience of a spectator in motion, moving along a path of distinct architectural views – prioritizes the subjectivity of the human dimension. Eisenstein’s appropriation of a descriptive language of the built environment to develop his theory of montage announces the spatial, and indeed urbanistic, applications of cinema.



II.3 Choisy’s drawings convey the complexity of visual perception as the mobile spectator moves through a site of multiple forms and multiple visual arrangements and hierarchies. Images from Choisy {1899} 1954 v.1.

While Eisenstein does not make the connection explicit in his essay, Choisy's spectator shares his detached gaze with Baudelaire's *flanêur*. The *flanêur* is the quintessential observer of urban space in theoretical literature. Baudelaire's most outspoken exponent, Walter Benjamin, is a crucial figure in the relationship between cinema and urbanism, and the runaway popularity of his work has made *flânerie* a critical fetish for urbanists. Citing Benjamin in both urbanism and film studies (and particularly in their disciplinary intersections) has become a cliché¹¹. But most reference to his oeuvre in this field is more concerned with the subject matter of walking in the city rather than his methodological and philosophical engagement with montage (see e.g. Donald 1999, AlSayyad 2006).

No Western philosopher has invested as much belief in the power of montage as a critical and formal method of philosophical inquiry as Benjamin. For him, an active

¹¹ At a symposium entitled "Visualising the City" at the University of Manchester in 2005, one delegate reported, "If I hear one more Benjamin reference I shall scream" (Scorer 2005).

intervention against the chronological and idealist¹² understanding of history was an urgent project that necessitated a radical break from traditional historical, literary or philosophical analysis. Benjamin was a writer, and, to be sure, the application of (cinematically defined) montage to prose works is awkward. Quite a bit of imprecise slippage occurs between montage as methodology and montage as a metaphor. And, with the proliferation of cinema in the early moments of the twentieth century, urban theorists' purchase of this cinematic metaphor increased exponentially, thus distancing the word from Benjamin's more rigorous interpretation. Nonetheless, Benjamin's research into the material dimension of the bourgeois experience of nineteenth century as immanent within the Paris arcades – *les passages* – advances the critical potential of 'montage' considerably. Indeed, according to Susan Buck-Morss, the materialist historiography of his unfinished and posthumously published *Arcades Project* goes so far as to propose:

¹² Wherein culture is defined as a realm distinct from and opposed to the realm of material production and economic activity. See Raymond Williams *Culture and Society* (1958:54).

The effect of technology on both work and leisure in the modern metropolis had been to shatter experience into fragments, and journalistic style reflected that fragmentation. Could montage as the formal principle of the new technology be used to reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection? (Buck-Morss 1988:22).

The counterintuitive relation of the fragmentary to the coherent is necessitated by *and* ultimately mediated by the new technologies of cinema as well as the mechanical reproduction of still images. Indeed, the capitalist implications of the latter are something on which Benjamin mediated in much of his work, especially his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction”. And it was his desire to create a new methodology of literary and historical analysis to reflect this paradigm shift in visual culture that led him to montage in the first place. “I have nothing to say, only to show” Benjamin once declared of his approach to *The Arcades Project* (Vp574 N1a, 8). But his presentation, even in the absence of a discussion, was by no means a transparent vessel for the communication of a series of quotations. His arrangement of the chosen collection of fragments was an interpretation in itself, a new kind of allegory.

III FROM CITY-SYMPHONY TO REGIONAL DOCUMENTARY: THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF REALITY

[M]etropolis and film interface as a distinctly modern production in which a correspondence between the city space and the film space, between the motion of the city and the moving image, exists. The machine of modernity that fabricated the city is also the “fabric” of film. The 1920s, a period of fluid exchange between architecture and film, created a nexus investing the actual mechanics of the bond.

– Giuliana Bruno 2002

The kind of three-second film that Louis Le Prince made out of his window in Leeds in 1888 would be called, retrospectively, an actuality film. Contemporary film criticism labels the ‘actuality film’ as a type of non-fiction filmmaking where the image(s) captured is neither edited nor organized into a larger argument. What distinguishes actuality filmmaking as a genre of non-fiction filmmaking beyond the neutral designation of ‘footage’ is that in the initial decades of cinema, this type of film was as popular and prominent as its more structured counterparts in fiction cinema, especially in the capacity of travelogue or event commemoration (notable actualities include street electrification, the first airplane flights, celebrity funerals, etc.) (Clarke 2007). The initial consumer passion for cinema, as it was for photography three quarters of a century earlier, reflected a thirst for realism and document. Though the popularity of pre-cinematic spectacles certainly anticipated film’s mass appeal, the medium’s primary association

with diversion and entertainment was not self-evident when the medium was dawning.

Contemporary mention of film or cinema connotes commercially produced, feature-length, narrative fiction. Yet, in the early days of cinema, dramatic film competed with non-fiction for audience attendance. And, as with other art forms throughout the period of modernism, the dynamism of the city was a major inspiration for artistic subject matter. In the last chapter, we learned how the interface of sensory observation and sociological insight into the temporal, kinetic and social vagaries of industrial capitalism and urbanization called for modes of visual representation to which cinema was uniquely suited. I will now turn my attention to how that aptitude was sharpened artistically, and how the refining of cinematic craftsmanship was imbricate, in the early years, with an aesthetics of actuality. The ways in which the modern city provided a laboratory for the formation of this aesthetic toolkit in

the 1920s has much to tell us about the range of urban issues that can or cannot be represented cinematically – and the complex political implications of those representations that sought to treat the city as a cohesive object of study. Of particular interest to the goal of delineating the relationship between filmic representational potential and the rise of the urban planning mentality is an exploration of how the visual grammar of a primarily aesthetic approach to cinematic urbanism, in the 1920s, came to be employed, in the 1930s, didactically.

The craft of non-fiction filmmaking was first honed, primarily in Western Europe, by avant-garde artists who identified their work as visual, as opposed to dramatic. Much has been written about how these artists found in filmmaking a space to marry the immediacy of consciousness of modernist writers like Joyce or Woolf with the ascendancy of subconsciousness of Surrealist painters like Dali or Duchamp (Barsam 1992). Significantly however, almost all of this initial generation of film artists eschewed staging and, instead, chose to focus the camera on what Dziga-Vertov¹³ famously called ‘life caught unawares.’ Dziga-

¹³ Dziga-Vertov, another Russian Constructivist artist extremely popular during Leninism and barely employable during Stalinism, is as pivotal to the development of montage as film practice as Sergei Eisenstein and as important to the development of the city as film subject as Walter Ruttmann. The journal he published, *Kino-Pravda* (Film Truth), advanced

Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) is often compared with Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of Great City* (1927); both films are the oft-cited examples *par excellence* of the city symphony genre of filmmaking.

According to Richard Barsam, “While the Americans were shaping a film tradition based on a romantic vision of life and ... the Russians were busy adapting the dynamics of filmmaking to the necessities of politics, the experimental filmmakers of France, Germany, and Holland were working in an area unbounded by sentiment or politics” (1992:58). To be sure, the vast majority of city-symphonies were produced in Western Europe, where the artistic (as opposed to political) implications of montage were an urgent matter. But the first film in this canon is expressly American and, because it defined much of the cinematographic vocabulary that later city-symphonies and eventually other kinds of ‘planning cinema’ would employ, a formal analysis of this early example of urban filmmaking merits a brief excursus.

many emergent theories of montage in the early days. And he pioneered the use of hidden cameras to realize his radical approach to rendering the actuality of everyday life.

In 1921, painter Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand collaborated on a short film called *Manhatta* that appropriated excerpts from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and sought to illustrate them with diverse images of New York City. This film is less discussed in critical literature than *Berlin* or *Man with the Movie Camera*, and the montage effect is less sophisticated than in later film. But the trend towards geometric affinity as a motivator of shot juxtaposition is apparent in this early experiment in urban representation. The original title of the film was *New York the Magnificent*, and it is often referred to as the first self-consciously avant-garde film made in America. Most of the film's camera angles rake either sharply upward or steeply downward, avoiding the horizon line in order to contract space telescopically – to foreshorten and emphasize what Strand himself called “the towering geometry” of the city (Haas et al 2005). The preference for collective imagery of the crowd and the cityscape anticipates most of the imagistic emphases of much of city-symphony filmmaking. The application of cinema to planning action, however, drew as much from the criticism of city-symphony tradition as from the representational potential it offered to urban analysis. Leftist thinkers (notably Siegfried Kracauer and John Grierson) problematized city-symphonies' perceived apolitical

avoidance of depicting class conflict or any other social antagonism.

Both Sheeler and Strand were followers of Alfred Stieglitz, whose tireless advocacy for photography to be considered an art form eventually involved steering photographic subject matter away from its pictorialist and painterly landscape tradition and toward sharply focused images of industry and urbanization (Legatt 1995) (see image III.1). Sheeler and Strand sought to expand that project and assert a space for film *qua* art. Juxtaposing verse from Walt Whitman, America's first self-consciously urban poet (Brand 1991), with carefully composed images of the metropolis' social and physical dimensions proved an expedient way to do so. Their meta-cinematic agenda included exploring the relationship between film and photography; the desire to demonstrate the specific qualities of the film camera as opposed to the photo camera led them to resist any camera movement and, instead, to let the city move in front of their static lens. Significantly, however, the opening shots are from the deck of a moving boat. The iconic initial moving image of America's great metropolis



III.1 Both of these famous Stieglitz photographs are ostensibly about industry. But the photogravure of *The Hand of Man* (1902; below) is classic pictorialism: mimicking brush strokes through soft focus. Stieglitz famously broke with this tradition between 1907 and 1911, the dates of the shooting and first publication of *The Steerage* (left).

The Hand of Man from <http://www.robertmann.com/>

The Steerage from <http://www.masters-of-photography.com/>



The film announces its organizational structure with intertitles taken directly from Whitman. The opening poetic excerpt reads: “City of the world / (for all races are here) / City of tall facades / of marble and iron. / proud and passionate city”. After this initial textual paean to the inextricability of the city’s social and physical characteristics, the two categories are separated into discrete chapters. For the rest of the film, the city is explored as *either* an agglomeration of human activity and interaction or, more often, a collection of built forms. But the text that opens the film declares that the city is both (see [excerpt 1](#); image III.2).

The first image is of lower Manhattan’s skyline from the south. At first the camera appears to be moving, but soon the viewer realizes that the camera movement is a function of the mobile vantage point of the boat deck. The primary focus of this view from the deck is the cityscape: the skyline is imposing and strong, but the mobile gaze that beholds it is subjective and unstable. Immediately, a fast-moving barge slices through the foreground of the frame. Another poetic intertitle reads, “When Million-footed Manhattan unpent, descends to its pavements” and the next cut reveals that the boat from which the previous sequence



III.2&3 *Manhatta* (1921) established much of the formal vocabulary for urban cinematography and established the oft-imitated precedent of using poetic language to describe urban experience. The opening sequence (top) establishes the physical landscape of buildings and bridges on the water. The next one (bottom) focuses on crowds.

was shot is the ferry (the Whitman reference is undoubtedly to his famous poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”; see image III.3). The film’s point of view suddenly shifts from the subjective camera position of the mobile spectator to the omniscient point-of-view of the sentient city as hundreds of commuters pour out of the ferry. The next shots are of crowds. In the film’s first hint

at a critical insight, mobile bodies give way to a geometric study of light and shadow in a Wall Street graveyard.

After the graveyard, another title card announces the end of the ‘crowd’ section and the film’s move to physical environment: “High growths of iron,/ slender, strong, / spendidly

uprising/toward clear skies.” The next shot is a cityscape, shot from high above the city, with tall buildings extending beyond the horizon. While at a completely different scale than the earlier shot of the crowd exiting the ferry, both shots convey the countlessness of the city’s forms. The camera slowly tilts down to reveal the street, but holds its focus on the grid only long enough for the viewer to begin to make the connection between the crowd and the buildings. The montage seems to imply that the film is headed toward describing a relationship between the social and the physical, but then undercuts our expectations with the insertion of another title card: “The building of cities:/ - the shovel, the great derrick,/ the wall scaffold; the work/ of wall and ceilings.” Now we are again amidst people, who again are shot omnisciently from above. When the film switches to a low angle and looks up for the first time, the shot is of the swinging hoist and boom of a crane on the same construction site. The sequence follows the crane to a silhouette of a construction-worker high on an I-beam. The physical and social are connected through images of the human labor that builds the physical environment, linked in a high-contrast composition of steel and worker (see image III.4).



III.4 Most images in *Manhatta* (1921) are about physical form or human activity; this is one of the only images that shows both in the same frame.

The next exploration is architectural, but Sheeler and Strand make sure to treat the full range of buildings Manhattan has to offer: first a tilt up an impressive revivalist downtown building, and then a high angle on a tenement roof, replete with water towers and multiple exhaust chimneys. Steam, that great symbol of industrial progress, links all of the images of this sequence; it is an element common to the buildings of the rich and the poor. Steam becomes increasingly central to the images as this sequence progresses, at times enveloping the entire frame to masque a cut between images of various types of buildings and chimneys. In one image, steam animates the space between two balusters, foregrounded abstractly so as to create a frame within a frame for the city below. But the physical space of the island city also exists within a natural frame, as the next intertitle reads: “City of hurried and sparkling waters, / City nested in bays” and the next

images depict those bodies of water that play host to many diverse forms of transportation, trade and industrial activity.

The next sequence opens with a different kind of steam, and an even more potent symbol of industrialism: trains. Contrary to most city-symphonies, though, the first two shots of trains in *Manhatta* are not in motion. The next sequence, introduced with the title card, “With lines of steamships/ threading every sea”, continues the steam motif, and plays on the vastly different scales of huge steam ships and their satellite tugboats. The following one is about infrastructure – “Shapes of the bridges, / vast frameworks, girders, arches” – and includes the only completely symmetrical shot of the film: Brooklyn bridge, framed such that the central pedestrian walkway is preeminent. And then, after some sunseting shots of the river and harbor: “Where the city’s ceaseless crowd/ moves on, the live long day.” This sequence begins by reprising the balustrade shot, though this time around, the three bulbous forms make two windows on the city. Between the two left hand balusters is a church steeple. Between the two right hand balusters is a street crowded with people and vehicles, automobiles, streetcars.... “Gorgeous clouds of sunset! / drench

with your splendor/ me or the men and women/ generations after me.” Nothing about this piece of text is particularly urban, which perhaps reflects that the figurative intent of Sheeler and Strand’s visual poem of Manhattan has converged with their poetic reflection on the world and society at large: the final shots are of sun behind a cloud, with an as-yet underdeveloped New Jersey extending to the horizon beneath it.

In the decade that followed *Manhatta*, the city as avant-garde cinematic subject reached its apotheosis. The city films of this era claim boldly that arranging fragments of urban life in such a way as to evoke a single artistic work such as a ballet or symphony is, in fact, a compelling and convincing celebration of the urban. While films such as these tend to venerate the mechanistic and the industrial, they rarely do so at the expense of a human dimension that activates urban experience and makes it something to honor. City-symphonies, popular in European and American avant-gardes in the 1920s and 1930s, are the greatest

cinematic examples of the urban montage.¹⁴ The cinematography of Sheeler and Strand forms a point of departure from which later filmmakers could extend and accelerate the formal description of urban experience, adding an Eisensteinian approach to montage that evokes urban rhythm as much as urban space. Unlike films that use montage as one technique among many, city-symphonies extend its use to the entire film. *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* is emblematic. The film is arranged as a day in the life of the city. It begins with a sunrise arrival to the city by train, and proceeds through the quotidian phases of life and work that unite Berliners across socio-economic strata: waking, commuting to work, adjourning to social activities such as sports, dancing, drinking, and eventually sleep (see image III.5).

Berlin: Symphony of a Great City is an exceptionally beautiful film. Critics often object to its apolitical aestheticization of its subject that collapses all social or socio-economic difference into a

¹⁴ See also the Paris of *Rien que les heures* by Alberto Cavalcanti (1925), the Moscow of *Man with the Movie Camera* by Dziga-Vertov (1928), and the Amsterdam of *Regen* by Joris Ivens (1929).



III.5 *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) juxtaposes different classes of the commuting crowds of Berlin – from top to bottom, students and professionals, soldiers, servers and factory workers – depicting a cohesive city of overlapping rhythms rather than a stratified city of socio-economic antagonism.

unified citizenry. When it premiered, Siegfried Kracauer dismissed the film as “just as blind to reality as any other feature film, and this is due to its lack of a political stance” (Kracauer {1928} in Macdonald and Cousins 1996:75). If Eisenstein invented film theory as we know it today, we have Siegfried Kracauer to thank for modern film criticism. He was a colleague of Walter Benjamin’s at the Berlin office of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where he reviewed current film and literature in the heady Weimar calm before the Nazi storm forced both men into exile (both were Jewish and idiosyncratically Marxist). But Kracauer’s work extended far beyond journalism. He wrote extensively on Simmel, and credits him with exposing quotidian reality as a viable object of study (Frisby 1986). He ended his career as a sociologist and film scholar in New York. His first professional engagement after leaving Europe was a fellowship at the Museum of Modern Art where he began research on how the films of the Weimar Republic reveal the psychic underpinnings of the coming terror, research that would eventually become a landmark book of film studies: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* {1947}. At the time, serious scholarship was reluctant to employ film (or popular culture more generally) to

prove sociological hypotheses. Kracauer’s break with this tradition advances Simmel’s observational and experiential method of social inquiry and Benjamin’s attempts to theorize modernity through analyzing the mass produced detritus of late nineteenth century Paris. Like his predecessors, he was an interpreter of the everyday. And film, for him, was worthy of analysis both as a reflection of a societal mindset and as an artistic medium whose faith in the real world was manifest. In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* {1960}, he asserts that “Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality... this reality includes many phenomena which could hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera’s ability to catch them on the wing.” Film, for Kracauer, “gravitates toward unstaged reality.” He primarily concerns himself with fiction film, but even in the fictional realm, he claims that “staging is aesthetically legitimate to the extent that it evokes the illusion of actuality” (1960:60).

Kracauer dedicates a chapter of *From Caligari to Hitler* to montage, in which he (somewhat derisively) describes the cameraman of *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* as having “the voracious appetite of

a man starved for reality” and the montage approach of its director, Walter Ruttmann, as “symptomatic of a withdrawal from basic decisions into ambiguous neutrality” (1974:183-7). He reduces Ruttmann’s approach to urban montage to an urban “cross-section” where the juxtaposition of images depicting social contrasts (hungry children cut to opulent restaurants, women strolling in the Tiergarten cut to women beating carpets) is not “so much social protests as formal expedients. Like visual analogies, they serve to build up the cross-section, and their structural function overshadows whatever significance they may convey” (1974:185). The likening of this film to a cross-section reminds us how much urban representation, even on film, owes to the visual language of architecture. It also hints at the need for new forms of urban imagery to reinvent this language and reorient it towards social concerns.

Kracauer was not alone in his criticism. John Grierson, the British filmmaker and ardent social activist who first coined the term ‘documentary’ in 1926 and defined it as the “creative use of actuality” (Barsam 1992), identifies *Berlin* and its ilk as antithetical to his ideal documentary film: “For all its ado of workmen and

factories and swirl and swing of a great city, *Berlin* created nothing” (Grierson {ca. 1934} in Macdonald and Cousins 1996:100). What Grierson means is, the film avoids any discussion (or even depiction) of social conflict. In fact, for Grierson, it provides no information at all, political or otherwise, such that the audience leaves the film no better educated than it was before seeing it. He does concede the film’s lasting influence and its many imitators. But both Kracauer and Grierson seem to miss the film’s powerful argument. In focusing on the dynamism of the city – its turbines, trains and crowds – Ruttmann is making another kind of juxtaposition, one that instantiates a commonality between widely diverse social actors and actions. He is not highlighting the differences between, say, rich and poor that Grierson and Kracauer would no doubt have welcomed. On the contrary, he is showing how both rich and poor are part of a unitary system. In so doing, Ruttmann’s montage advances the idea that the *city itself* is worthy of observation and analysis, as much as its constituent history, social relations, or physical form. He is not suggesting that the Weimar metropolis was free of conflict or utopian, but rather that the rhythms and flows that cohere in city life are no less apparent or important than the

social forces that fragment it. Furthermore, only juxtaposing diverse fragments can render the coherence of the urban scale as visible, and, therefore, worthy of philosophical reflection.

For all of its box office success and popularizing of ‘montage’ cinema, Eisenstein himself did not seem to pay much attention to *Berlin* (as far as extant sources in English indicate). Perhaps he shared the political stance of Kracauer and Grierson¹⁵. For his part, Grierson considered his work as maximally different from the work of someone like Ruttman. Where Ruttman drew inspiration from German expressionist painting and early modernist literature, Grierson looked to adapt the formal and polemical strategies of Soviet propaganda documentary into the British documentary film (Barsam 1992:77). The movement that he inspired did not develop fully until the Great Depression and its aftermath. In this complex time of social alienation and political experimentation, a philosophy of state sponsorship of

¹⁵ Kracauer was a Marxist, Grierson called himself a social democrat who was financially dependent on the Fabian Society, whereas Ruttman would go on to support the Nazi regime and advise Leni Reifenstahl on cinematic propaganda for the Nazis. Interestingly, the only city-symphony that caught Eisenstein’s eye was another film about New York City, produced ten years after *Manhatta*, by a brilliant filmmaker who has been pushed to the margins of film history, Jay Leyda, called *A Bronx Morning*.

the arts emerged that drew on a paternalistic desire to bring ‘culture’ to the masses and to document and justify governmental strategies to curb the effects of widespread poverty (Taylor 2002). Such endeavors often conflated the palliative objective of moral uplift and entertainment with the propagandistic agenda of validating and garnering support for government programs.

This tradition migrated across the Atlantic in the form of New Deal filmmaking. In the late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration established an experimental public relations campaign to inform Americans about the second phase of the New Deal and the urgency of its alphabet agencies’ programs (Hogan 1998). The Resettlement Administration (RA) was formed in 1935 to relocate struggling families, both urban and rural, to planned communities set up by the federal government. The office was headed by Rexford Tugwell, one of Franklin Roosevelt’s most valued ‘Brains Trust’ advisors and one of this country’s most outspoken advocates for rational planning in the Comtian/Saint-Simonian tradition. According to John Friedmann, Fredrick Winslow Taylor’s idea of scientific management inspired Tugwell’s definition of a planning mentality and his outrage at the

“enormous waste he saw in America’s industrial system” (Friedmann 1987:6). Friedmann goes on to argue that part of what led Tugwell to the scientific rigor of Taylorist efficiency was its perceived ability to insulate planning from the caprice of politicians overly influenced by business interests. For Taylor, efficient management and problem-solving required breaking down a task – such as bricklaying – and timing it, then reducing the number of motions involved in the task¹⁶. Coordination was key to this endeavor. And so, in organizing the RA, Tugwell set out to create “coordination, in a new agency of rehabilitation, resettlement, and land-use programs” (Stershner 1964:263).

One aspect of Tugwell’s managerial approach that I find particularly striking is, for all his emphasis on efficiency, the tasks identified as necessary to his rational plan were not exclusively utilitarian. Art figured largely in his plans. By the time the RA was formed, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) tradition of conscripting artists into various New Deal programs for the

¹⁶ The image that this methodology conjures would seem to benefit greatly from the original application of film developed by Eadweard Muybridge in 1870s – to test the physiology and mechanics of a horse’s gallop – or the urban analysis of spatial behaviors developed by William H Whyte in the 1960s that we will explore in depth chapter VI.

multiple purposes of providing employment, entertainment and publicity was already in the works (Doud 1965). Tugwell wanted an artistic document of the RA’s work to go further. He felt that the extremity of the planned resettlement required a mass communications strategy that included its own radio and photography campaigns and, eventually, films. While the RA worked with hundreds of communities, its most enduring achievements are three planned towns (Greenbelt, Maryland; Greenhills, Ohio; and Greendale, Wisconsin) and two documentary films (*The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*). But this legacy provides more than a convenient coincidence of large-scale planning and documentary film production. The RA’s film office represents the only peacetime federal production of films in United States history; therefore, its philosophy is an important example of one way in which the communicative capacity of filmmaking can be enlisted to advance a planning agenda.

This philosophy emerges from a variety of inputs. The New Deal represents the largest-scale experiment in planning at the national scale in the US. While Roosevelt’s various reforms and alphabet

agencies concentrated power at the federal level, the era was more receptive to political experimentation than at any other point in American history since the founding fathers. While the resonance¹⁷ of John Maynard Keynes' economic thought with the founding principles of the New Deal is well documented (see Schlesinger 1980), Keynes also had ideas about the role of art in reforming society. For Keynes, part of the argument for government subsidy of art-making was to counter fascism's obvious success at rallying citizens through public ritual (Esty 2000). As such, his preference was for performance and public display¹⁸. Furthermore, literary studies positions Keynes as a mediating figure in modernism, in that "Keynes not only theorized the economy but, like Forster, Woolf, and Eliot, made artful language out of the cognitive maze of the metropole" (Esty 2000:1). The ability of publicly displayed art to produce social

¹⁷ Tugwell though of himself and the president as 'unconscious Keynesians' and remembers Roosevelt referring to Keynes as "that Englishman who tried to tell us to do what we were doing anyway."

¹⁸ In "Art and the State," he develops the following hierarchy: "Architecture is the most public of the arts, the least private in its manifestations and the best suited to give form and body to civic pride and the sense of social unity. Music comes next; then the various arts of the theatre; then the plastic and pictorial crafts . . . with poetry and literature, by their nature more private and personal" (Keynes 1982:345).

solidarity dovetails with its ability to provide jobs for artists. The latter objective was an important consideration in putting up to five thousand unemployed artists on the public roll during the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project (Wilkinson 2000).

Another hugely popular pastime during the Great Depression in America was, of course, the movies. By the time of the Crash, movie audiences were demanding more "talkies": the dramatic diversionary application of cinema was ascendant. "Throughout most of the Depression, Americans went assiduously, devotedly, almost compulsively, to the movies...the movies offered a chance to escape the cold, the heat, and loneliness; they brought strangers together, rubbing elbows in the dark of movie palaces and fleapits, sharing in the one social event available to everyone" (Stevens {1979} 2007). The development of synchronous sound in the late 1920s gave film producers the ability and film consumers the desire for new levels of naturalism and narrative. The medium's innovators, almost all of whom considered themselves primarily visual artists, regarded the emergence of sound with trepidation. According to Siegfried Kracauer,

Eisenstein warned of a disastrous tide of “highly cultured dramas” and René Clair decried the theatrical film as “misled by a fatal vogue of ‘adaptations’” and “built on the model of theatrical or literary works by minds accustomed to verbal expression alone” (Kracauer [2007]). The American movie industry was quicker to understand the market appeal of ‘talkies’ than its European counterparts, and Hollywood’s global dominance of commercial film production from the 1930s onwards stems from its early investment in sound. Sound also allowed for non-fiction film to document life in a more literal and expository ways. While the first feature-length documentary, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) was shot in the silent era, the didactic impulse grew exponentially after the advent of sound technology.

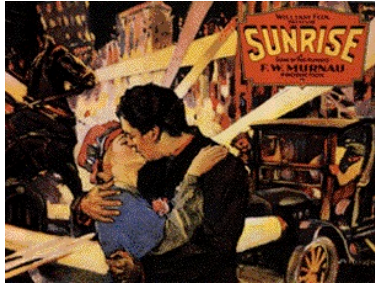
The action in Flaherty’s documentaries was staged, and often inaccurate (see e.g Ginsburg 2002). Many of their topics, such as *Nanook* or *Man of Aran*, were nostalgic in tone and ethnographic in nature¹⁹: the films depicted the struggles of societies living in pre-modern conditions in modern times. *Nanook* was hugely

¹⁹ In which context, it is no wonder that the only academic social science to invest seriously in filmmaking as research methodology is anthropology.

popular and made Flaherty an international celebrity. So, when Tugwell was looking for a filmmaker to work with the Resettlement Administration, he looked up Flaherty – at the time working under Russell Lord, an information officer for the Department of Agriculture – who recommended a young film critic, poet and ardent New Dealer named Pare Lorentz (Doud 1965)²⁰.

In his memoir, titled *FDR’s Moviemaker* (1992) and published the year that he died, Pare Lorentz cites the two films that most influenced him to become a filmmaker as F. W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* and Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *The End of St. Petersburg*, both fictional 1927 masterpieces that sought to illuminate, in very different ways, the differences between urban and rural society in the 1920s. The former is one of the most significant artistic attempts in any medium to dramatize Simmel’s sociological position that the mental condition of the urban citizen is more sophisticated than that of others – and more prone to moral ambiguity. In the

²⁰ According to Tugwell’s first person account, Flaherty introduced the two men, but Lorentz’s biographer has a different account; he credits Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace with introducing Lorentz, who had recently written a piece for *Newsweek* on the Dust Bowl, to Tugwell (Snyder 1994).



III.6 The movie poster for *Sunrise* (1927, left) employs many of the German expressionist formal techniques of the film's triumphant and romantic entrance to "The City."

Image from <http://filmsdefrance.com/>

film, Murnau's Hollywood debut after emigrating from Germany in 1924, a young man from the country is seduced by a woman from the city who convinces him to kill his wife, sell his farm, and join her in the city. After carefully planning the murder, he reconsiders and instead brings his wife to the city, which is presented in the scalar distortion and heightened *chiaroscuro* that typified German expressionism, where they live happily ever after in urban, urbane bliss (see image III.6). Many critics refer to it as one of the greatest films of all time (e.g. AFI 1998; *Time* 1998). *The End of St Petersburg* also follows a rural farmer's journey to the big city, this time not lured by lust but pushed by penury. This film, along with Sergei Eisenstein's *October*, was commissioned to memorialize the tenth anniversary of the Revolution. To answer this brief, Eisenstein applied his 'ideological montage' to recreate the events of the October Revolution by choreographing the epic

scope of collective action. Pudovkin, on the other hand, chose to single out one individual's narrative to symbolize the mass struggle. The film opens on a farm where a peasant must stay in the field and plow as his wife dies in childbirth. The work he eventually finds in the city is as a strikebreaker, but when he realizes the extent to which he has been manipulated by the system that has so wronged him, he violently attacks his employer. After serving a hard-labor jail sentence for his outburst, he is forced to join the army. He sees firsthand the destructive imperialism of bourgeois Europe in the throes of the Great War. But the ensuing revolution frees St. Petersburg from its capitalist oppressors and offers new hope for the worker in the form of centralized, long-range economic planning.

When Lorentz went to work for the RA, he had never made a film before. He had steady work as a film reviewer, and had attracted Hollywood's disdain for passionately criticizing the studios' avoidance of realism or social justice in a 1930 book called *Censored: The Private Life of the Movies*. Almost simultaneously, he had attracted the Roosevelt administration's approval for a hagiographic picture book called *The Roosevelt Year*:

1933. He had unsuccessfully tried to drum up support in Hollywood for a documentary about the plight of the Great Plains in 1933. Lorentz's pre-existing desire to make a film on this topic gelled with Tugwell's desire to publicize the RA's mission to a wider audience. Both men agreed that, "The work of the photographic section in documenting the Dust Bowl and explaining the need for the RA program was effective, but still photographs could not reveal the violence of a dust storm in action. Motion pictures could" (Snyder 1993:24).

Pare Lorentz, raised in Clarksburg, West Virginia, and Rexford Tugwell, raised on a farm on the southern shore of Lake Ontario, shared a profound sympathy for rural lands and agricultural livelihoods. Lorentz made two highly significant films while working for Tugwell at the Resettlement Administration²¹, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*. They are both unabashed propaganda pieces for the New Deal, and are highly effective. While Tugwell initially wanted to commission a series of eighteen films, "Lorentz recommended that the RA concentrate on

²¹ By the time *The River* was completed, the Resettlement Administration had been absorbed into the Department of Agriculture and renamed the Farm Securities Administration and Tugwell had resigned (Snyder 1993).

making one film that would be good enough to be shown on commercial screens... to be able to hold an audience by dramatic means and, at the same time, to make clear the causes of the national problem it treated and why the government had established the RA program" (Snyder 1993:25-6).

The Plow That Broke the Plains bases its case against unsustainably laissez-faire agricultural policy and economics on a historic description (or a "picturization" as the film's scrolling text prologue calls it) of the over-farming of the Great Plains. It does not explicitly offer a path to reform and does not mention the New Deal at all. Articulating the need for relief and reform is the film's purpose, rather than advocating a particular instrumentality. *The River* is a more resolved piece of work, both artistically and polemically than *The Plow*. *The River* also blames unchecked progress for regional imbalances that lead directly to ecological disasters, in this case the flooding of the river valley. But it offers a clear solution: the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). As with much New Deal thinking, the scale of the problem was commensurate with the government's confidence that its new approach was up to the challenge. Still, "Perhaps the most

significant part of the [rural relief programs] was that someone was willing to try them out at a time when the nation was going through a soul-searching experience. The accepted ways had failed” (Brown 1962:525).

In making his first film, Lorentz initially turned to the expertise of more experience filmmakers to shoot his film. He hired three film artists as cinematographers, all of whom espoused the politics of the radical left. Leo Hurwitz was a member of the Communist party, and Ralph Steiner and Paul Strand were both radicals. For Strand, the connection between filmmaking and radical politics had strengthened in the fifteen years since he made *Manhatta*²² (Stony 2007). But both Lorentz and Tugwell shunned communist sympathies. In Tugwell’s political career, he constantly had to contend with accusations, both veiled and direct, that his long-range planning and collectivism were tantamount to communism. Because his “ ‘planned capitalism’

²² Strand had just finished making a highly political film portrait of a group of exploited Mexican fisherman commissioned by the leftist government of Lázaro Cardenas a rarely seen film called *The Wave*. Cardenas’ predecessor, Abelardo Rodríguez, had welcomed Sergei Eisenstein to Mexico to shoot the unfinished masterpiece *Que Viva Mexico* at the behest of Upton Sinclair in 1931. Cardenas himself welcomed Leon Trostky to Mexico six years later.

fell between the doctrinaire extremes of laissez faire and socialism, his words were bound to meet with some disapproval and distortion” (Sternsher 1964:229)²³. Lorentz, for his part, fired Strand and Hurwitz when they insisted that the voice-over script for their shots of sequences of dust storms hold capitalism directly responsible for the agricultural crisis. In a 1939 magazine interview, Lorentz explained, “they wanted it to be all about human greed and how lousy our social system was. And I couldn’t see what this had to do with dust storms” (White in Snyder 1993:31).

The script that Lorentz wrote for the *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is certainly accusatory. But it lays equal blame on short-term economic policies and ecological ignorance as on an unforgiving landscape of “high winds and sun” (Lorentz 1935). The harsh Depression-era realities of the Dust Bowl made for a documentary approach whose epic scope and rural focus prioritized the condition of the land rather than the people who

²³ To be sure, capitalist extraordinaire William Randolph Hearst publicly labeled him a Bolshevnik, but Tugwell also drew fierce criticism from the left: socialist Louis Fraina (aka Lewis Corey) dismissed him as a conservative “primarily concerned with assuring markets for the products of capitalism” (Sternsher 1964:229).

eked a living from it. The scrolling text prologue makes this overt from the outset: “This is a record of land... of soil, rather than people – a story of the Great Plains.” The historical narrative – that Lorentz wanted so much to be engrossing enough to “merit the commercial distribution and exhibition he desired” (Snyder 1993:26) – begins with cattle. An animated title card maps the area of study and then dissolves to a familiar image of undulating wheat. The wide expanse of this landscape, with a few intermittent shots of a lone cowboy observing his flock from a hilltop, is classic imagery of the Romantic West. It could be the opening to any fiction film of the Western genre, and indeed, many shots in the film were repurposed directly from Hollywood stock footage. (After Lorentz fired his anti-capitalist cameramen, he needed cheap source material, which he found, with great difficulty, in outtakes from fiction films).

The narration skewers the romantic associations of this Manifest Destiny imagery with a spoken description of the land’s unsuitability to its chosen purpose: “The grasslands, a treeless windswept continent of grass... a country of high winds and sun; high winds and sun; without rivers, without streams and with

little rain.” But the metaphoric shorthand for the primary culprit in the tragedy Lorentz relates is the plow. The first close-ups in the film focus on (horse-drawn) plow blades cutting violently into the soil as the narrator continues with “Two hundred miles from water, two hundred miles from town, but the land was new.”

When the film’s swift historical narrative passes from the era of settlers to the beginnings of World War I, the bucolic landscape cuts to newspaper clippings of exponential rises in the price of wheat and the ironic boast of the narrator: “Wheat will win the war!” The subsequent sequence of plows intercut with cannons, grain-bearing ships, tractors and tanks is pure Eisensteinian montage, complete with sound effects of tankfire punctuating the militaristic drumroll in the musical score (see [excerpt 2](#)). The montage ends with a ticker-tape victory rally, but the constant refrain of plow blades cutting the earth continues past the historical moment of the wartime surge in wheat prices. The country, the film seems to suggest, has become so addicted to rapacious farming (see image III.7).



The narrator resumes his ironically victorious tone: “then we reaped the golden harvest” over images of increasingly mechanized farm production, this time juxtaposed with a printing press and overlaid text advertisements of the homestead “giveaways” at “rock bottom prices” to returning servicemen. One of the most striking images in the film comes after this press and advertisement montage, where the camera tracks along fast moving tractors at night. The camera is moving faster than the tractors: the pace of farming can’t quite keep up with the momentum of the optimism and super-speculation of the postwar agricultural boom. But the land finally catches up with the farming: the next sequence is a series of desolate images of cracked and dessicated earth, panting dogs and abandoned, rusting farm equipment. Then come the dust storms themselves, wreaking havoc on the lives of those farmers that the narration refers to as “baked out, blown out and broke.” The final shots of the film include staged scenes of these poor farmers finally abandoning their arid landscape and again moving west, as the narrator reminds the audience: “onto the west, they headed into the setting sun.” Suddenly, cars are introduced intercut with

III.7 In *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), Pare Lorentz creates a classically Eisensteinian montage to make a causal link between overfarming and the war effort.

extreme close-ups on rivulets of dust and sand. While the film leaves an indelible impression that human folly is to blame for the crisis, the final line of narration reminds the audience that, in the final analysis, nature has determined the sad fate of the Dust Bowl: “the sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter in American agriculture.”

Documentary film expert George Stoney, who himself was an information officer for the Farm Security Administration in the 1940s, is unequivocal about the “evangelical” intention of Lorentz’s film work. He cites the obvious influence of Eisenstein and the Soviet montagists in developing Lorentz’s approach: the purpose was to “convert” people into New Deal supporters. *The River*, in particular, according to Stoney, took the form of an “evangelical sermon” with music resonant of the Doxology (Stoney 2007). Stoney calls *The River* a hymn, but the film begins with the panoramic nationalism of an anthem, shots of clouds moving over a variety of riverbanks and a Homeric catalogue of the each tributary and stream that eventually pours into the Mississippi. The narration includes a historic as well as geographic list of the ways that the River has contributed to the

American economy and progress. But, the narrator lays out “the tragedy of land twice impoverished” in the same historical sweep as *The Plow*, collapsing decades of political choices and their incalculable human cost into the grandiloquent language of elegy: “We fought a war and kept the west bank of the river free of slavery forever. But we left the old South impoverished and stricken, doubly stricken, because besides the tragedy of war, already the frenzied cotton cultivation of a quarter of a century had taken toll of the land. We mined the soil for cotton and then moved west.”

Formally, the cinematography and editing in *The River* is excellent; Lorentz’s craft has advanced considerably since making of his first film, and with the production of his second film, he has developed a template for what could be called the regional planning documentary. Like *The Plow*, the scope of this film is vast both geographically and historically. And the tenor of the narration’s heavy-handed language shows that Sheeler and Strand’s early use of Whitman’s transcendent free verse established a paradigm:



III.8 *The River* illustrates its poetic enumeration of regional scope and importance throughout the US with a visual catalogue of river scenes that refer elliptically to a map (top image) of the river's reach.

From as far West as Idaho,
 Down from the glacier peaks of the Rockies –
 From as far East as New York,
 Down from the turkey ridges of the Alleghenies
 Down from Minnesota, twenty five hundred miles,
 The Mississippi runs to the Gulf.
 Carrying every drop of water, that flows down two-thirds of the continent,
 Carrying every brook and rill, rivulet and creek,
 Carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds the continent
 The Mississippi runs to the Gulf of Mexico.
 Down the Yellowstone, the Mily, The White and Cheyenne;
 The Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James and the Sioux;
 Down the Judith, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,
 ...Carrying every rivulet and brook, creek and rill,
 Carrying all the rivers that run down two-thirds the continent –
 The Mississippi runs to the Gulf (Lorentz 1937).

In its sentimental, almost operatic form, the film continues with its catalogue of how the river's importance to the history of American progress. Initial sequences enumerate the industrial uses of the river, for power and transportation: the "lumber in the north" the "coal in the hills" as "new machinery and cleared new land." When the narrator acerbically lists the "cotton for the spools of England and France... Germany and Italy," he intones an autarkic or at least protectionist position. But the narration also references the building of the river cities of St. Paul, Cincinnati and Omaha in the same moralizing tone that implies that industrial progress, when left to its own devices, has an agricultural and human cost. Yes, "we built a new continent," but in so doing we desiccated the land so that it could no longer absorb uncontrolled water; we ravaged the ecosystem. The narrator again recounts the

list of tributary rivers, but this time, the ships along the Mississippi are not conveying progress, but the pollutants of an overzealous industrial rape of the landscape.

The film signifies its narrative crescendo with a flash of lightning and the grave voice-over reminder of a thousand miles of levee to hold. “We sent armies down the river to help the engineers fight a battle on a two thousand mile front. ... they fought night and day to hold the old river off the valley.” As the flood grows in magnitude, the shots expand in scope. The force of the river cannot be contained by the spatial organization of the frame. The images of impoverished sharecroppers in this film – lacking, we are told, in food, water and medical supplies – don’t quite manage the intimacy of a Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange still portrait, they are clearly in a direct visual dialogue with those famous photos of weary faces against clapboard walls. The drama of indigence feels overwrought when the camera enters people’s houses and zooms in on children scraping morsels of food off their plates. But the images are nonetheless effective in illustrating the condition of what the narration calls “aimless, footloose and impoverished” and a generation “facing a life of dirt and poverty.” While the interior space of home is more

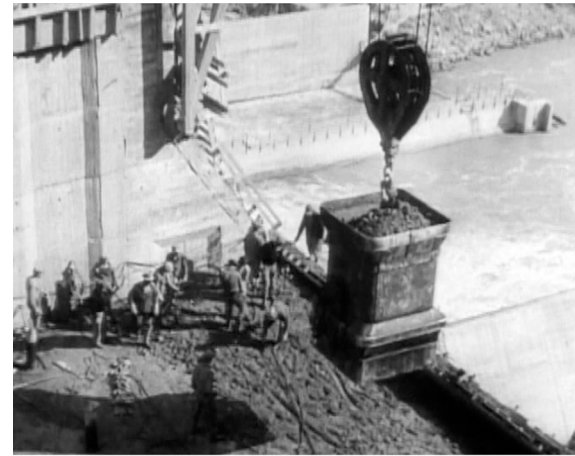
personal than in any other of Lorentz’s sequences, the people depicted are not individualized characters in the drama. The montage consistently juxtaposes humans with the visual refrain of the river’s expanse; the inhabitants who struggle in its valley are part of a landscape, rather than a people, that has been wronged. The misery chronicled is consistently collective, as with striking aerial shots of a submerged town and the voice-over: “We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns, but at what a cost.”

This film is more explicit in its economic philosophy than *The Plow*. The narrator tells us that, “Poor land makes poor people; poor people make poor land.” This aphorism is classic Tugwell, whose policy prescriptions for the RA can be summarized as follows:

The Resettlement Administration was concerned with poor people and poor land. Poor people needed emergency aid. Poor land required long-range conservation measures... The RA’s operations were related to the whole agricultural economy and the national economy. When farm prices rose, farming on poor lands increased, undermining the more efficient farmers’ position in the supply-demand situation. When farm prices fell, farmers on submarginal lands, without purchasing power and unable to pay taxes, required constant, sizable expenditures by local and national governments. Thus, Tugwell noted, attempts to cultivate

poor land were a drain on the economic well-being of the nation as a whole (Sternsher 1964:262).

As we have seen, the scope of the planning action Tugwell espoused and the scope of the cinematic narrative Lorentz outlined are coextensive. The use of artistic devices in this regard relate primarily to the text of the narration. Yet Lorentz's imagery, editing and music support the narrative's panoptic approach to its subject. An appropriate name for the sub-genre template Lorentz developed might be the 'documentary epic.' If so, the undeniable hero in *The River's* story is the Tennessee Valley Authority. The final act begins with a verbal list of statistics of how much of the land has been ruined for agricultural use. But the New Deal has offered the answer of regional planning; the Deus ex Machina of the narrative is flood control (see image III.9). Earlier images of construction in the film functioned as an ironic critique of unchecked industrial pillage. The second time we see a sequence of construction images, they are demonstrating the power of planning, its mastery over the land, for "the old river can be controlled." Everything, it seems, can be "locked and dammed, regulated and controlled."



III.9 Shots of the construction of the TVA's first dam illustrate the heroic savior to impoverished southerners in their thousands: the marriage of technology and regional planning.

But the film is careful to explain the long-range, Tugwellian thinking required for success. "You cannot plan for water unless you plan for land," the narrator tells us, before describing crop-rotation and topsoil conservation. Moreover, "You cannot plan for water and land unless you plan for people." The next sequence of images depicts a new agricultural community, homesteaders "living in homes they themselves built, paying for them on long term rates." The key is electric power. The penultimate sequence is of power lines, with another long verbal list of places that benefit from this power (both electric and governmental) to make a new Tennessee valley for a new generation, "Power to make the river work!"

The River was a commercial and critical success – it won ‘Best Documentary’ at the 1938 Venice Film Festival, beating Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia*. In the years that followed, “the interest in documentary films dealing with contemporary problems exceeded the number of films being made. This public interest was stimulated by the success of *The Plow* and *The River* and the comprehensive program of nonfiction films shown at the 1939 World’s Fair” (Barsam 1992: 157). One of the films, *The City*, screened at that event marks the most explicit convergence of Lorentz’s epic documentary style and the articulation of a specific urban planning agenda.

IV THE CITY GOES TO THE FAIR: LEWIS MUMFORD AND THE FILMIC CASE FOR PLANNING

The story we have to tell... and which will bring people from all over the world to New York, not merely from the United States, is the story of this planned environment, this planned industry, this planned civilization. If we can inject that notion as a basic notion of the Fair, if we can point it toward the future, toward something that is progressing and growing in every department of life and throughout civilization, not merely in the United States, not merely in New York City, but if we allow ourselves in a central position, as members of a great metropolis, to think for the world at large, we may lay the foundation for a pattern of life which would have an enormous impact in times to come.

– Lewis Mumford

In 1939, a forty-two minute film called *The City* screened before a captivated audience at the New York World's Fair. Within the context of this "Fair of the Future", the film presented the current state of congested American cities as a crisis whose only solution was the alternative of regional and community planning. According to a contemporary account in the New York Post, "this extraordinary documentary arguing for city planning" was such a revelation that "If there were nothing else worth seeing at the fair, this picture would justify the trip and all the exhaustion" (Winsten 1939) Indeed, the film was self-consciously polemical in its depiction of a lost past, an untenable present and an idealized future. Within this framework, the proposed role that urban planning would play was to deliver society to this future of communities "close to the earth, open to the sky" (Steiner and Van Dyke 1939). Attaining a future forged, through conscious

design and planning, from the new technologies of the day was the Fair's overriding thematic objective. But the producers of *The City* invested more profoundly in this belief than did the commercial interests who saw it as a high-minded way to ply consumers with newly invented products (such as the television, which was introduced at the Fair)²⁴. Reflecting on the event years later, Marshall Berman – the writer I have turned to often in this essay for his expansive definition of modernism – calls the 1939 World's Fair "one of the great moments in New York's history" and, at the same time, a "vehicle for the vision which... would spell the city's ruin" (1985:271). The filmmakers embraced this

²⁴ If the goals of Mumford and his friends were to warn the public of the threat that unchecked capitalist interests posed to good urban form, the fair was a quixotic choice of venue: "The Fair's ostensible message – that foresight and benevolent social guidance would result in a peaceful and prosperous future – was superseded by the more immediate marketing of American industry" (Harrison 1980: 1).

vision, seeing the Fair as a way to advance an agenda: to apply these new technologies towards the recuperation of ideals from the past that had lost their currency in a system of Laissez-faire capitalism and unchecked urban growth.

The film, like the Fair, was the work of many makers. While no single institution or individual authored the Fair's vision of the future independently, the way in which the theme drew on the work of Lewis Mumford illuminates the crucial dialectic between the past, present and future. Mumford and several of his colleagues leveraged the exposure of the World's Fair of 1939 in order to propose a particular kind of urban reform that drew on a specific representation of the existing form of cities and a specific representation of a potential future form. In particular, visual representations – which include the plan of the fairgrounds, the design of the American exhibits, and the presentation of a propaganda film called *The City* – expose the philosophy of physical planning, and its role in the reform of society at the urban-regional scale, at this particular moment in the history of American urbanism. This chapter will focus on the third and

most self-contained of these texts, Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner's *The City*.

The City is neither the most influential nor the most revered of cinematic attempts to treat the relationship between social processes and urban space. The extent to which its relevance relies on the fame of the men who contributed to its production and the unique circumstances of its theatrical release at the World's Fair should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, the film's intellectual and formal antecedents place it at the intersection of many complex ideas of what the city is and how the challenges and opportunities it presents should be addressed. Its primary function was to convey the urgency of adopting a new, regional scale of action – and advocating a new paradigm of intervention – in the urban built environment of the United States. Therefore, the strategies employed to make its case demand analysis. The choice to articulate its argument in the audio-visual language of cinema presupposes that the need for urban planning should be made accessible to the widest audience possible. More importantly, the choice of medium attests to the belief that the physical form and social life of cities are

inextricable and mutually constitutive. How that medium was used in this case, and how cinematic choices reflect certain aspects of urban discourse, is the subject of this chapter.

In terms of the film's production, three men – Pare Lorentz, Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke – were the primary authors of *The City*. But the film owes its existence and argument to a greater cast of characters. Chief among these is Lewis Mumford, who wrote the text of the narration. Before we can enter the body of the film, the biases and positionalities of each of these merits investigation.

Lorentz wrote the original outline and produced the film, with Steiner and Van Dyke sharing directing and cinematography credit. Each of them represents a distinct tradition within filmmaking, and each brought this to bear on the final product. Ralph Steiner is more closely aligned with avant-garde art than with social reform, for photographs of clouds and experimental filmic meditations on the play of light and shadow in flowing water²⁵. As we have seen, history has anointed Lorentz as "FDR's

²⁵ See Steiner's 1925 cinematic masterpiece, *H₂O*

filmmaker" and the principal artistic propagandist of the Second New Deal (Snyder 1994). Such large-scale issues require a large-scale vision, which, in terms of his earlier efforts at representing the realities of the Depression manifested itself in the panoramic imagery of collective experience and landscape. Willard Van Dyke, on the other hand, represents a distinct approach to evoking the pathos of social problems to that of his collaborator. "Where Lorentz is at his best with the epic sweep and scope of national problems, Van Dyke excels in depicting the virtues of individual people. Where Lorentz sings of America in the Whitman tradition, Van Dyke tells stories in the tradition of Carl Sandburg" (Barsam 1992: 166). In terms of the film's imagery and editing, the counterpoint between the individual and the collective experience of urban problems is what imbues *The City* with its resonant power. In terms of the film's expository argumentation, the problem-solution structure is what emphasizes the social urgency of the film's proposition.

The problem that the film poses is the harsh living conditions to which the exigencies of modern industry and capitalism have led American society. The solution is a vision of community that

bears a specific and deterministic form, remains economically self-sustaining and politically autonomous, and provides opportunities for citizens to live 'close to nature'. The problem is grounded in visual evidence of the present; the solution simultaneously looks back at the lost ideal of the New England village and looks forward to the design of the model community. As such, the film's argument should not be removed from the body of work of those who advocated most ardently for regional planning as a new architecture of justice: The Regional Planning Association of America. Mumford was arguably the most famous member of the RPAA and the one most intimately involved with the making of *The City*. But he was not the only member of the group to influence its production. In fact, as one of the most publicly accessible of standalone texts in support of regional planning that emerged from the organization's advocacy work, *The City* renders the RPAA's core beliefs cinematically in order to catalyze a popular reaction to the built environment.

The founding of the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) in 1923 broke with the existing technocratic and

efficiency-oriented tradition²⁶ of American planning. "Composed of a small number of architects, planners, and social critics in full rebellion against metropolitan centralization and suburban diffusion alike, the RPAA proposed an alternative best described as community planning" (Lubove 1963:1) The environmentally balanced region with which the RPAA sought to replace the profit-oriented metropolis was not made up of a form as prescriptive as Ebenezer Howard's model for the Garden City. Rather, it looked upon that "classic formulation not as a plan to be applied literally and mechanically like the rectangular subdivision but as a clue to a new urban orientation and structure" (Lubove 1963: 1). To approach this new orientation,

²⁶ In the final moments of the nineteenth century, previously unrelated fields of expertise coalesced around a unified body of knowledge to be applied to urban problems, when, at long last, "comprehensive physical planning was generalized across the proposals of such disparate groups as tenement house surveyors, industrial efficiency experts, and municipal art societies" (Boyer 1983:ix). The professional tradition finally announced itself on the national stage in 1909, with the adoption of Daniel Burnham's plan for Chicago and the convening of the first city planning conference in Washington, DC. The growth of professional positions in the new field was exponential over the next decade. By the early 1920s, urban planning could claim textbooks, professional associations, and plans. While American planning was born out of a reformist tradition in housing and an expanding of the role of government, it grew quickly into technocracy where economic efficiency eclipsed social equity as a normative goal (Lubove 1967: 14).

the past was not viewed solely as a reserve of values, but of critiques as well. Mumford and his colleagues "appropriated the nineteenth century critiques of 'blight' and 'congestion' but recast them in a rhetoric and ideology that proposed a radical restructuring of the city according to zoned functioning and 'decentralization'" (Meyers 1998:293).

By 1933, the RPAA would cease to meet formally. Members continued to collaborate, and several of them tried to regain the previous decade's momentum. None of these attempts proved successful, yet towards the end of the decade, an opportunity emerged that would allow the group another chance to make its ideas public, and, indeed, to expound to a larger audience than ever before. The World's Fair, many thought, might provide the RPAA another chance to convey its message.

In 1935, as the United States continued to reel from the Great Depression, a group of New York businessmen decided an exposition would infuse the city with much-needed optimism and capital. Chicago's "Century of Progress" World's Fair of 1933 had turned a profit and drawn a considerable number of tourists

to the city, a precedent which convinced the New York group to incorporate the New York World's Fair Corporation and set the project in motion. The list of investors and advisers assembled demonstrates a strong belief in the impact the fair would have on the city's economy, but the growing group of enthusiasts soon split over opposing views on the fair's content. Contemporary reports characterized the two groups as the "traditionalists" and the "functionalists". Lewis Mumford – already well known as a writer and as a founding member of the RPAA – came to be the voice of the latter, arguing that past exhibitions of this type were overly commercial, self-congratulatory and retrospective. He wanted to use the scale of the event to propose a broad vision for the future, indeed, to thematize "The Future" as an organizing element of the Fair. He saw it as an opportunity to advance a social reformist agenda rather than merely to showcase new scientific and technological advances. This optimistic vision of the future drew on nostalgic images of the past and ominous representations of the present.

IV.1, 2 & 3 Promotional imagery for the 1939 World's Fair. From top, the illustrated postcard depicts the Beaux Arts planning of the site, the aerial photograph shows the final design reality of axial vistas and monuments, and the advertisement for the General Electric exhibit proclaims that the future of technological innovation and greater efficiency is attainable, but remains a mysterious spectacle waiting to be uncovered.



The task of translating this vision into a concrete plan for the Fair's programmatic design and layout fell to another founding member of the RPAA, Robert Kohn. In 1936, Kohn – former president of the AIA – was appointed to co-chair the committee convened to design and implement the Fair. He accepted the position in order to "influence the popular designs of the future" and, specifically, to promote improvements in housing (Spann 1996:195). His priorities had been forged in the crucible of capital deficits and population pressure during World War I: in the need to create dormitory neighborhoods for war-industry workers and entire communities for returning veterans and in the capacity for the profession of architecture to guide such endeavors. Passionate about his new role at the Fair, he stated in the committee report that "Mere mechanical progress is no longer an adequate or practical theme for a World's Fair, we must demonstrate that supercivilization ... is based on the swift work of machines, not on the arduous toil of men" (As cited in Cusker 1980:4). Such statements are typical of the grandiose rhetoric of the event (see images IV.1, 2 and 3).

Taking his cue from the New Deal era successes at arguing for government intervention in community organization through film, Kohn conceived of a movie on regional planning to be shown to fair audiences (Cusker 1980). He secured grants from the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations to produce the film. While its production did not revive the RPAA, it functioned as an audio-visual articulation of the association's agenda.

Given his background in visualizing government efforts at social reform, Lorentz was the obvious choice of producer for Kohn to realize his vision (See Dal Co 1979). The extent to which the two collaborated on the initial outline of *The City* is not known, but echoes of RPAA rhetoric are apparent everywhere in the film. For example, the title of the film, with its general classificatory noun and definite article, signals the scope of its argument: the problem is general but definite, omnipresent but tractable. That slippery unit of socio-spatial organization called 'the city' is what we must act upon, not the forces that have frustrated social opportunity and led American society to the condition of an unequal distribution of space and resources, the condition that Kohn sought to redress.

"The city", then, is more than merely the problem. Capitalist land speculation and labor relations, disempowered or misdirected governance structures, and unchecked industrial agglomeration may be the sources of the reality that the film critiques, but 'the city' itself is what provides the field of endeavor for a new kind of intervention to correct that reality. For Mumford, the inextricability of physical and social aspects is what defines the urban and what necessitates interdisciplinary action at the urban-regional scale, rather than through politics, economics or architecture in isolation. Mumford's regionalism argues that the territorial scales of these traditional disciplines (nation, state, municipality, economic sector, housing unit) are incommensurate with the challenges that the city presents²⁷. While *The City* never explicitly states a working definition of "the city", it presumes a definition that applies both to the present reality that it decries and the future potential to which it aspires.

²⁷ This argument for a shift in political thinking towards the regional is most germane to Mumford's ideas for new, planned communities. However, the need for a downshift in scale applies equally to his belief, after the unfulfilled promises of the Treaty of Versailles and Wilsonian internationalism, that significant political change must begin at the local and regional levels (Luccarelli 1995: 22).

The way urban scholarship situates Mumford and his oeuvre qualifies him uniquely to define the city for the purposes of this discussion. His genius, to my mind, is his early understanding of the imbrication of the city's physical form and social life. In an essay he prepared for *Architectural Record* in 1937, he makes explicit that "the fixed site, the durable shelter, the permanent facilities for assembly, interchange and storage" are no more or less the building blocks of urbanity than "the social division of labor, which serves not merely the economic life but the cultural processes" (Mumford 1937:29). Strategically, this list of components recalls the classically defined elements of civilization as taught in elementary school ancient history classes²⁸. But it also forms the basis for the modern city Mumford was proposing in the late 1930s. His skill in employing a vocabulary common to both the past and the future without sacrificing the promise of modernity enables him to parse what a city *is* as well as what it *means*: "The city... is a geographic plexus, an economic organization, and institutional process, a theater of social action, and an aesthetic symbol of collective unity" (Mumford 1937:29)

²⁸ Mumford's reading of the historical development of sedentary urban civilization is much more complex than he lays out in the 1937 piece; see *The City in History* for a more thorough exegesis of urbanism.

But, while nostalgic for the progressive idealism that WWI had stripped from his contemporaries who came of age after the Great War, his intellectual and political orientation was not retrograde. Rather, he sought to mine the archives of Western civilization for traditions worthy of revitalization in order to envision and implement a future that broke sharply with the socio-spatial status quo. His hopes for regionalism, for example, "rested on the possibility of redirecting the technological legacy of the Enlightenment away from the accumulation of power over nature toward an ecological principle of interaction with the natural world" (Luccarelli 1995:22). This interaction was not a rejection of the technological promise of his era. Indeed, Mumford found new technologies to have profound potential to redress the inequalities of urban living in the late 1930s, when successfully synthesized with ideals from the past.

Throughout his career, Lewis Mumford never ceased to argue for the functional role of idealism. While he later recalled his first major book, *The Story of Utopias* {1922}, as flawed and youthful, the thrust of his body of work maintains the belief that "It is our utopias that make the world tolerable to us: the cities and

mansions that people dream of are those in which they finally live. The more that men react upon their environment and make it over after a human pattern, the more continuously do they live in utopia" (Mumford 2003) *The City* can be read as an attempt to restore the productive power of utopian thinking to planning the interaction of the physical and social elements of our communities.

The City is organized²⁹ into five chapters: the small town, the industrial city, the metropolis, the townless highway and the garden city. Each represents a type of socio-spatial organization and an epoch. And the real-world sites the filmmakers chose to illustrate these zones of potential and reality are significant. To capture the first of these types, the rural idyll of the eighteenth century New England small town, Steiner and Van Dyke shot in Shirley Center, Massachusetts. (It is no coincidence that Shirley Center was the childhood home and working base of Benton

²⁹ In film studies jargon, the film's organization is emblematic of the "bracket syntagma: brief scenes lacking in syntagmatic development are linked by montage (and often by optical punctuation such as the dissolve); the scenes represent 'typical samples of a same order of reality,' without suggesting any chronological relationship" (Guynn 1990: 46)

MacKaye, Mumford's colleague at the RPAA credited with conceiving the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Appalachian Trail.) The second and third types deal with the extreme congestion and injustice of the industrial and metropolitan forms of 1930s urbanism and were shot in Pittsburgh and New York City, respectively. The fourth and fifth types represent the opportunities technology offers in the form of the superhighway future and the proposed, modern community it can enable, where the ideals of small town living are brought to bear on planned new towns where technology, open space, checks on growth and land use designations create a better life for all residents. But the scene of the future was, significantly, captured in real life. To argue for the need for a new paradigm of physical intervention and social reorganization, the filmmaker's reference existing projects: the federal government's resettlement experiment at Greenbelt, Maryland, and the privately developed one at Radburn, New Jersey. The RPAA, in its lifetime, advocated more comprehensive and radical changes than could be encompassed in the prescriptive formula of the Garden City model. But for the purposes of this film, the choice to represent existing attempts to reshape urban society sought to inspire the audience with the

attainability of a new paradigm of community planning. As in so many of the exhibits at the World's Fair, a theme recurred: a near-utopian future is within reach.

The film opens with a series of shots of standalone houses in a small-town setting. After the opening credits, written text appears to announce the film's thesis over an image of a sunlit lake: "Year by year our cities grow more complex and less fit for living. The age of rebuilding is here. We must remould [sic] our old cities and build new communities better suited to our needs."

Immediately, the film treats the viewer didactically, but as part of a collective 'we' that includes the film's own voice. This voice is about to tell us how exactly we might go about "remoulding" our urban landscape to be more responsive to human need. As the text disappears the camera tilts up from the water to a water wheel. And when the river's controlled flow begins to drive the turbine, the choice of that powerful symbol of an earlier incarnation of American industry – the watermill – becomes a lament for the antiquated era it represents in the face of the

machine age that replaced it. The didactic, in this case, begins with the elegiac.

The next two shots are close-ups of the name of a farm with a date, 1791. This sequence reminds the viewer of the temporal trajectory suggested by the text ("year by year our cities grow more complex"): the film is now referencing, and mourning, a past that has been all but lost. Other nostalgic images follow: a covered bridge, a swimming hole, a horse-drawn carriage, and a town meeting. The simplicity of the sequence belies its strategic editing to evoke the slow and ordered rhythm of life in this place.

As the meeting's speaker rises to address the assembled, the voiceover narration begins:

"A century or two ago, we built our church and marked the common out. We raised the town hall next, so we could have our say about the taxes, or whether we need another teacher for the school. When town meeting comes around, we know our rights and duties, and no harm if we disagree. In all that matters, we neighbors hold together."

The text ascribes the village a singular voice and a timeless intentionality as a social unit, historically continuous and internally harmonious. The actions that this proud community

has carried out are testaments to its political autonomy and social cohesion, yet articulated in terms of building projects such as the raising of the church, the common and the town hall. The narration posits the town's built environment and politics as enmeshed, and through this proposition Mumford's writing imbues the film's argument with his broader philosophical position.

As the viewer is drawn out of the meeting hall and into the heart of the village, the village's singular 'voice' continues to extol the virtues of the small town in the first person plural. The narration goes on to add the dimension of work (or, more precisely, craftsmanship and livelihoods) to this dialectic of the physical and the social. The images that this monologue underscores are of a wheelwright, a handloom, a granary. Work itself is idealized ("We work from sun to dark, if you can call just work a job that helps makes a body feel at peace") as one aspect of a balanced life that includes the recreational and agricultural possibilities of living "close to nature". The text makes explicit the fact that the speaker represents the village rather than any individual community leader: "The town was us, and we were part of it." The physical and the social aspects of the town, just as the collective and the

individual, are not only inextricable, they are co-immanent. But with this final quote, the speaker shifts to the past tense: the community and its (built) environment are no longer coterminous; that connection has been lost.

The film transitions to the modern industrial city by juxtaposing the town blacksmith's shower of sparks with those from a modern steel mill. A wide shot of smokestacks and a melodramatic darkening of the musical score to minor chords, a quickened tempo and an ominous crescendo signal the shift to the industrial city and to the present. The narration is no longer voicing the common ideals of a community, but the frenetic anxieties of a fractious society. The timbre of the same speaker's voice becomes a bellow, and the language recalls a rhythmic canto of (sophomoric) modernist poetry:

Inventions, power, black out the past/
Forget the quiet cities,
bring in the steam and steel: the iron men/
The giants, open the throttle, all aboard, the promised land/
Pillars of smoke by day, pillars of fire by night, pillars of progress/
Machines to make machines, production to expand production, there's wood and wheat and kitchen sinks Calico, already made in tons and carload lots, enough for millions/
Millions!/
Faster and faster; better and better.

The choice of imagery in this section is obvious, overwrought and weak, but the visual cliché of industrial smokestacks and exhaust fires is well served when the sequence quiets down and pans across to a miserable row of company houses. The unjust proximity of low-quality housing to excessive pollution, the film seems to argue, is a function of the agglomerative and expansionist imperative of unchecked industrial growth:

"Machines to make machines, production to expand production." Again, in the combination of word and image, we hear the echo of Mumford's other writings, albeit much simplified: the laissez-faire economics of the period lead to an amoral facilitation of grossly imbalanced distribution of resources. In other words, without planning to curb the greed of unregulated capital accumulation and bring us back in line with nature, capitalism would choke the worker with ever-increasing smoke with its spurious logic that "smoke makes prosperity, they tell us." The film exploits the viewer's sympathy when it focuses on the plight of children in this environment, playing on rickety wooden walkways and almost killing themselves trying to cross the train tracks. As a final stroke of heavy-handedness, the sequence

comes to a close with a wooden-legged worker limping from the steel mill back to his quarters.

Cinematically, the next section is the most innovative audio-visually (see [excerpt 3](#); image IV.4). Cutting from the smoke of industry to the steam of a train moving goods to the big city, the third chapter of the film begins with the sheer size of New York's skyscrapers. Shot from below, the buildings appear as abstractions that dwarf the swarms of people rushing beneath them. The composition of this architectural montage recalls the opening shots of the facades of the small town houses, a choice which emphasizes the extent to which the scale of this built environment is incommensurate with human activity. The pace of the editing quickens when the camera alights to the street and its fast-moving crowds. The narration ("Follow the crowd/ Get the big money/ you make a pile and raise a pile") links this set of social relations to the pecuniary and materialistic culture of metropolitan life. To "make a pile" also references directly Mumford's stated belief that the miner (whose realm – Pittsburgh – the film has just visualized) and the financier (whose realm – Manhattan's Wall Street – the film is exploring as we hear this



IV.4 The cinematography and montage (above) introduces us to the city of *The City*: it is mechanized, monotonous and congested; its citizens are caught in an imposing geometry of towering forms that is inconsistent with productive social relations.

quote) share a curse of capitalism. In *Technics and Civilization*, Mumford writes, "The miner's notion of value, like that of the financier's, tends to be a purely abstract and quantitative one. The miner works not for love or for nourishment, but to 'make his pile'" (Mumford 1934:77).

Many of the shots (such as a crowd emerging from the subway) are direct allusions to *Berlin: Symphony of a Big City* and other city-symphonies. But *The City* differs from its cinematic predecessors with its overt indictment of the impersonality of the metropolitan condition, exemplified by an office scene of long rows of young women at typewriters accompanied by a chorus of dictation that's mechanical and impersonal.

At this point in the film, the pattern of each chapter is clear. Each begins with an introduction to the built environment, followed by a visual characterization of the what the filmmakers see as the essential mode of human activity within that chapter's type: craftsmanship and democratic congregation in the small town, miserable toil in the industrial town, and impersonal speed in the big city. Each chapter contains a sub-section of how children

play. In the city chapter, a boys' game of stickball ends with a traffic accident and the overworked ambulance rushing a man hit by a car to the hospital.

Mechanized food production is intercut with close-ups of workers eating lunch as quickly as they can before rushing back to work. In this reality, all social relations are mechanized, automatic and quick. High in an office tower, men admire a woman on the street leeringly; the only human interaction in this city, it seems, is impersonal and predatory. But traffic congestion is what binds together the internal logic of this chapter, with recurring scenes of an auto-dominated urban landscape – complete with details such as a fast-ticking taxi-meter, and impatient commuters in gridlock looking out car windows. The rapid succession of traffic imagery is brought to a halt by the ringing of Sunday church bells. Suddenly, downtown is empty, desolate. But the highway is filled with cars.

The chronological organization of the film's chapters posits the turn away from the values of politically and agriculturally self-sustaining small town as the root of the present conditions of

congestion and impersonality that it critiques so harshly. Yet the Deus ex Machina that this film offers to save the day is technology. An impressive hydroelectric dam and power lines announce the final chapter and the neat solution. Before we have even entered the Garden City, the film shows the viewer the energy infrastructure that will allow new towns to be planned and built away from existing power sources. The idea of hydropower connects the new technology to the small town's watermill from the film's introductory chapter, and it resonates with Mumford's intellectual agenda of putting modern science in the service of the usable values of the past. Indeed, the geographic diffusion of industry that electric power enabled was a key component of Mumford's 'neotechnics' (Luccarelli 1995).

The Garden City that the film enters for its joyful and optimistic resolution is the proposed city of the future. But many viewers in 1939 were aware that the images from Radburn and Greenbelt were real: a modern factory's leisurely dining room, pedestrian commutes, accessible recreation such as horseback riding, bicycling, softball games, swimming, gardening, and fishing. An electric stove and an electric washing machine show that much of

the drudgery has been taken from housework. The community newspaper comes off the press and is delivered to the front porch. Shopping is done at a modern market; the vegetables, the commentator explains, come from nearby farms. These details underscore the autonomy of the community; it seems to produce all it needs. And its form is specific, with the school and medical clinic at the center of the community.

This idyllic combination of past values with technologically enabled planning, the film tells us, is the product of a new "vision." Images contrast this new potential with the crowded tenements of the industrial city. The narrator asks, "Should we sink deeper into old grooves, or shall we build and rebuild our cities, clean again, close to the earth, open to the sky?" The film returns, in its final moments, to its well-worn device of depicting children, playing in large playgrounds (see image IV.5) or playing in the dirty street. The film asks us to make a choice between these two alternatives. But the only tools it seems to offer is belief in a better way of socio-spatial organization and in the technology that can enable it. The film offers no strategies to get us there.



IV.5 The idyll of *The City's* proposed solution to metropolitan congestion – the garden city – is exemplified by the returning to an image of children playing, but this time, they are safe from the street and the train tracks.

Even laudatory contemporary reviews criticized the film for lacking any discussion of a mechanism for implementing this new model of urbanism. *The City's* only reference to politics comes from the film's invented past, where town hall is an empowered unit of local governance. Even in the negative middle sections, the film faults society at large more overtly than any political or economic structure.

The absence of any discussion of ways and means reminds us of the specificity of the film's intended objective: to organize a reaction to the built environment that inspired lay people to see urban planning as a cohesive body of knowledge that could be applied towards ameliorating social problems. The influence of this communication strategy is impossible to gauge. But its ideas, both implicit and explicit, have had a profound effect on the American understanding of city form and the ability to shape it. The choices that make up the film must be viewed primarily in that light. What were the principal notions that might convince a population of an urgent need to reshape the built environment? *The City* shows us that neither the expertise of planners nor the practicability of their proposals were considered subjects that could catalyze a public reckoning with city form. To do so would require a polemic against the existing form of cities, coupled with a paean to the lost values of the rural order and an invocation of the neotechnical future. To be sure, this choice of strategy required a significant 'dumbing down' of sophisticated strains of thought. (Mumford certainly engaged political reality in his other

work, especially in his 1920s critiques of Thomas Adams³⁰ in the run-up to the Regional Plan of New York (Meyers 1998). But the distillation of the regionalist perspective, particularly in a moment when the influence of the defunct RPAA had waned, conveys much of how this perspective was to be communicated (and hopefully understood) by the public at large. The influence of this communication strategy is impossible to gauge. But the ideas, both implicit and explicit, within it have had a profound effect on the American understanding of city form and the ability to shape it. The 1939 World's Fair introduced the world to television, adding "radio sight to sound" (Lewis 1991:291) and heralding the dissemination of moving images to that basic unit of the city, the household. The space of moving-image consumption became private and the tolerance for federal interventions in the planned economy had subsided. The Fair, in the guise of the General Motors exhibit of high-rise towers and

superhighways, also unveiled "the battle plan" of urban renewal (Short 2006:19)

³⁰ In 1923, the same year that Mumford et al founded the RPAA, Thomas Adams was appointed Director of Plans and Surveys for the Russell Sage Foundation's proposed "Regional Survey of New York and Environs", the forerunner to the Regional Plan of New York. Mumford and Adams. Their major difference of opinion related to Adams' philosophy of "diffuse recentralization" or containment of industry and residential population as opposed to Mumford's "decentralization" which called for the network of satellite cities visualized in the final chapter of *The City* (Meyers 1998).

V FROM ILLUSTRATION TO OBSERVATION: JANE JACOBS AND THE INTELLIGIBLE CITY OF VERITÉ

I am interested in the drama of things we happen to encounter, not those we plan.

– Cesare Zavattini, author of the landmark neorealist screenplay for *Bicycle Thieves* (1949)

Lewis Mumford’s magisterial urbanism emerges from his scholarly immersion in the city as archive. In *The City in History* {1961}, he tracks primal elements of city form through four millennia of urban history (Mumford 1989; see also Sennett 1996). The observational urbanism of Jane Jacobs, on the other hand, is rooted in her everyday experience of the present. As such, it recalls the methodological challenge Simmel issued to his positivist peers. As we have seen, Simmel’s “phenomenology of culture” – wherein belief in “the possibility of finding in each of life’s details the totality of its meaning” is vital to sociological insight (Goodstein 2002:210) – signaled the rise of montage thinking: the aesthetic assembly of fragmentary details into a panoptic experiential world. But, up till now, we have looked at films that have engaged montage to marshal the instrumental power of visual and audio-visual representation to support a text-

based expository argument – what I call the evocative tradition of planning cinema. The next step is to chart how urbanism has moved, in its use of film, from representation to analysis. That move, I will argue, draws on a new treatment of the visible world in which the aim is the discovery of ‘truth’ through observation rather than the instrumental use of ‘truth’ via illustration. A brief review of how the devices of the evocative tradition paralleled the top-down nature of the pre-1960s planning mentality is necessary before examining the strategies of this mentality’s detractors, like Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, whose tools of resistance gave rise to this new mode of urban observation. This chapter situates Jacobs’ observational writing within a context of contemporaneous experiments in describing the world in order to

understand it, as opposed to describing it in order to change it³¹. In non-fiction filmmaking, the observational impulse emerges in vanguard attempts at a new kind of film truth: *cinema vérité*.

The City is the most explicit intersection of American documentary film and urban planning traditions. Its format – a format which, as we have seen, Pare Lorentz perfected through producing his rural/regional planning cinema – came to suggest the default structure for ‘problem-solving documentary’ (Guynn 1990). The function of its major filmic devices, specifically poeticized voiceover and illustrative montage of epic historical sweep, was to render the scale of vision of regional thinkers like Tugwell or Mumford. But the structure and formal tools were also appropriate to other strains within an expanded notion of planning thought, from city marketing to advanced building technology (Gold and Ward 1997³²). After World War II, this

³¹ I owe the articulation of this distinction to *The Intelligibility of Nature: How Science Makes Sense of the World* (2006), in which historian of science Peter Dear discusses the complex interaction of intelligibility and instrumentality.

³² Gold and Ward’s argument emphasizes British films about town planning, which is a fascinating and distinct tradition that merits further analysis but is outside the scope of this essay; *The City* screened commercially in Britain during World War II and, according to Gold and Ward, was widely seen.

scope of the vision reflected the context of the major legislative reforms that Mel Scott calls a “nation-wide renaissance in city planning” (1969). The “nadir of federal support for urban planning” provoked this renaissance by catalyzing local efforts; in lieu of appropriations, the federal government encouraged local authorities to draw up land-use plans, subdivision regulations and zoning ordinances (Hanchett 1996:285-9). By the end of the decade, however, the federal government would aggressively enshrine its direct role in the physical shaping of American cities with the landmark Housing Act of 1949 (Lang and Sohmer 2000). That same year, the New York City Housing Authority chose to illustrate the principle tenet, that every American deserves “a decent home and a suitable living environment”, through the production of a documentary film called *For the Living*, directed by Leo Seltzer and Lewis Jacobs.

This film’s organization, cinematography, montage and the language of its narration leave no doubt that its makers were careful students of *The City*, *The River*, and *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. It opens with panning shots of the New York Skyline, tilting shots of an uptown buildings, and a competent montage of

shots of various distances, with women exiting shops and looking in store windows. When the narrator proclaims that “it is the people who make a city what it is. And in another sense, it is the city that makes the people” we are in the familiar territory of aphoristic attempts to explain the essential nature of the city. But the intention in this case is to remind its viewers that all of its inhabitants, rich and poor, belong to one social system that should demand mutual empathy on the part of all its citizens. The epic sweep of images of construction, bridges and tunnels is indeed majestic. But, then, the film reinforces both the proximity and social invisibility of the majestic city’s poor by panning from one of these railway bridge to the slum, described in voiceover as “random, careless, cruel” and “littered, airless, blocked, backwash of a city’s growth” (see image V.1) The shots presented to illustrate the extreme conditions of this slum are, counter-intuitively, of children playing. The information in these shots conveys much of the same kind of vitality that Jane Jacobs extols in the North End of Boston or William Whyte holds up as exemplary in 101st street. But the narrator tells the audience what to think in this case: we are to be shocked at the indigence we ignore in our own backyard. Instead of turning our backs on our



V.1 *For the Living* (1949) stills: this montage illustrates the narrated description of the slums as a “littered, airless, blocked backwash.”

fellow citizens, we should embrace the Housing Authority's plan to clear the slums and replace them with housing projects. This movie exemplifies the purity of the urban renewal philosophy in program's earliest stages³³.

For this kind of epic and didactic approach, the evocative use of film functions primarily as illustration for an argument scripted, for the most part, in advance of shooting. In other words, what I have called the evocative tradition in planning cinema is deductive, meaning it infers particular instances from a general law. The general law, or, more precisely, normative principle, which the 'planning filmmaker' seeks to corroborate cinematically, is the ideal of transpolitically coordinated and technocratic intervention in our communities and regions on the part of some centralized authority.

³³ It should be said that this film is sensitive to the structural issues at play in the cycle of poverty that sustains the slum: A couple acted-out and directed scenes show discriminatory price-gouging victimizing black families, Jewish families, families with children, those with current addresses above 96th street (Lenox Avenue at 130th Street is the Harlem address mentioned in the scene).

That vision, of planning as a directive power, belongs to Rexford Tugwell. When Tugwell was the first permanent head of the New York City Planning Commission (1938 – 1941), he battled against the vision of another top-down planner, Robert Moses, who preferred action to planmaking. At root, their conflict was, perhaps, a battle of egos (Friedmann 1987:107): an economics professor versus a master builder, the collective mind versus the meat ax. But both men shared a belief in the power of big plans. In an uncharacteristic tipping of his hat to his one-time adversary, Tugwell even wrote an affirmative article called “The Moses Effect” in 1960, coining a phrase that has recently been recast in a positive light in the context of New York City's current penchant for macro-projects³⁴ (Oder 2007). But when Jacobs was writing her riposte to urban renewal in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* {1961}, “the Moses Effect” was anything but benign. No single figure is more identified with urban renewal in America as Robert Moses, who wielded the power of the Title I program absolutely (Caro 1975). The tool to demonstrate that the Moses model of rebuilding cities was, in fact, “the sacking of

³⁴ e.g. New York's failed Olympic Bid, Fresh Kills, Atlantic Yards, or plaNYC 2030.

cities” was observation (Jacobs 1992:4). But the way Jacobs rendered her observation in prose provides another model of arranging recorded fragments of experience into a powerful argument for a sea change in our thinking about cities.

While the belief that Eisensteinian montage could incite revolution has waned, the basic premise of isolating some fragment of social reality and then juxtaposing it with another to attract attention and to inspire thought has traversed between the canons of urbanist film and literature to the point that it often no longer reads as a formal strategy. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1985), Marshall Berman argues that the Jane Jacobs’ simple prose in *Death and Life* masques a subtle and knowing use of the ability of montage to pick up where Walter Benjamin left off, to “reconstruct an experiential world so that it provided a coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection” (Buck-Morss 1988:23). Berman argues that while Jacobs’ “...prose often sounds plain, almost artless” she is actually “working within an important genre of modern art: the urban montage” (Berman 1985:315).

Jacobs’ own account of what she intended in her introductory description of Hudson Street is no less polemical than the original revolutionary intentions of Eisenstein. In Jacobs’ case, the intention is to argue against the prevailing doctrine of mono-use buildings in car-oriented landscapes. She argues for the kind of street that figures such as Robert Moses and Le Corbusier wanted to destroy. For where the latter saw an antiquated chaos, Jacobs saw “an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole” (Jacobs 1992:50). While Berman critiques Jacobs’ chosen metaphor of dance for ascribing too much authorship to some pre-ordained choreography and not evoking enough of the spontaneity both writers obviously cherish, her description of the movements each of these ‘individual dancers’ reminds us of Benjamin’s belief in juxtaposing fragments as the path to ‘the coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection.’

The dance-like montage of Hudson Street is peopled with a mix of named characters Jacobs interacts with daily – Mr. Halpert, Joe Cornaccia’s son-in-law, Mr. Goldstein – and strangers –

executives and business lunchers, longshoremen, high school students – who add to her street’s diversity of uses (1992:50). Crucially, she focuses on the specific, isolated *actions* of each – watering plants, closing a storefront’s metal shutter, rollerskating – not their *interactions*. Thus, the latent logic she is suggesting emerges from the contrasts in her diverse cast of characters and diverse catalogue of urban social practices. It is a montage. And Berman places this prose montage within a canon of urban art that includes “Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of Great City*, Dziga-Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, Dylan Thomas’ *Under Milk Wood*” (Berman 1985:316).

By situating Jacobs’ work within this artistic tradition, Berman is making a case that her choice of this technique is appropriate to her mission: to illuminate an urban vitality whose essence is its diversity, and whose existence is threatened by the violence of urban renewal. Her technique is by no means scientific. The evidence that proves her theory is her subjective experience of the neighborhood where she lives. To be sure, Jacobs extrapolates hugely from her observations to articulate specific urban “conditions” such as “most blocks must be short” or “the district... must serve more than one primary function.” She is

certainly not merely presenting observed details neutrally for her reader to piece together on his own. But her writing style reflects a new order of operations in the formulation of urban thought. The observed details precede the analysis.

We have seen how the enumeration and juxtaposition of diverse fragments can illustrate an argument in order to provoke a particular sentiment: the montage approach to urban representation can foster sympathy for an urban planning intervention or provoke resistance to it. But can it also aid in what Friedmann calls the “recovery of political community” by dispersing the tools (and devolving the analytical power) to decipher the world around us? When Friedmann references Jacobs’ work, he does so in the familiar terms of specific recommendations to activate street life (1987:373). But perhaps Jacobs’ method, her faith in observation and common sense, has as much to teach us as her conclusions. ‘Eyes on the street’ refers to a normative strategy for reclaiming the urban street as a public space in terms of security, and that civic engagement recovers political community through the shared activity of communitarian stewardship. But it also offers a strategy for documentation and analysis: collective and sustained critical

observation of spatial practices. What seems self-evident in retrospect – that turning our eyes to our streets is the best way to evaluate their performance, and, in turn, the effectiveness of their design and management – was not an obvious application for non-fiction cinema in the first sixty years of its engagement with urban subject matter. While Dziga-Vertov wanted explicitly to orient the use of the medium towards film-truth (*kino-pravda*) and Walther Ruttmann exemplified the “such-is-life attitude” of the New Objectivity³⁵ (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) (Kracauer 1974:181), truth did not mean, for them or their contemporaries, data. Codifying an aesthetics of actuality was political, but it wasn’t proof.

“Observational film” is another name for cinema vérité³⁶, a movement in documentary that emerged in France concomitantly

³⁵ Kracauer turns to Gustav Hartlaub for a definition of this strand in Weimar art in the 1920s: “*Neue Sachlichkeit* ... was related... to the general contemporary feeling in Germany of resignation and cynicism after a period of exuberant hopes... the positive side expresses itself in the enthusiasm for the immediate reality as a result of the desire to take things entirely objectively on a material basis without immediately investing them with ideal implications” (Hartlaub in Kracauer 1974:165).

³⁶ Some historians call the American manifestation of the genre or movement by its less pretentious name “Direct Cinema.” I use the more recognizable term of *vérité*. Critics disagree as to whether the labels are



Chronicle of a Summer (1961), after a brief four-shot montage of approaching Paris by train, the title appears over the most quotidian of urban images – commuters exiting the subway.

with French fiction cinema’s *nouvelle vague*. Both burst onto the international scene in the same year, 1961, as Jacobs’ magnum opus. The cinema vérité movement began with the debut of *Chronicle of a Summer*, a collaboration between Jean Rouch, a civil engineer turned ethnographic filmmaker, and Edgar Morin, a sociologist. Despite its French origins, the vast majority of films

coterminous or not (e.g. Mamber 1973; Barsam 1992). I presume that they are identical in meaning.

that belong to this tradition are American (Mamber 1974). Verité's basic cinematic premise holds that the filmmaker's gaze is that of a fly-on-the-wall. The voice of the maker (both literally and figuratively) does not guide the viewer through the action that unfolds. That action is entirely uncontrolled. Obviously, films produced in this way are no more objective than their expository counterparts with voiceovers and clearly articulated theses. They tend to be less didactic, but they have no less to teach. But the belief that the verité film's narrative or argument emerges from the images captured – and not the other way around – announces a profound break with the documentary tradition that developed between the emergence of film sound in the late 1920s and the emergence of portable cameras and recorders of synchronous sound in the late 1950s.

The technological innovation that enabled this break motivated a recovery of some of the earliest impulses in non-fiction cinema. Between 1922 and 1925, Dziga-Vertov defined his famous call for *kino-pravda* as a mandate to catch, on film, 'life caught unawares.' Cinema verité is a direct translation of *kino-pravda*. The verité filmmaker trains his camera on the 'real world' and films



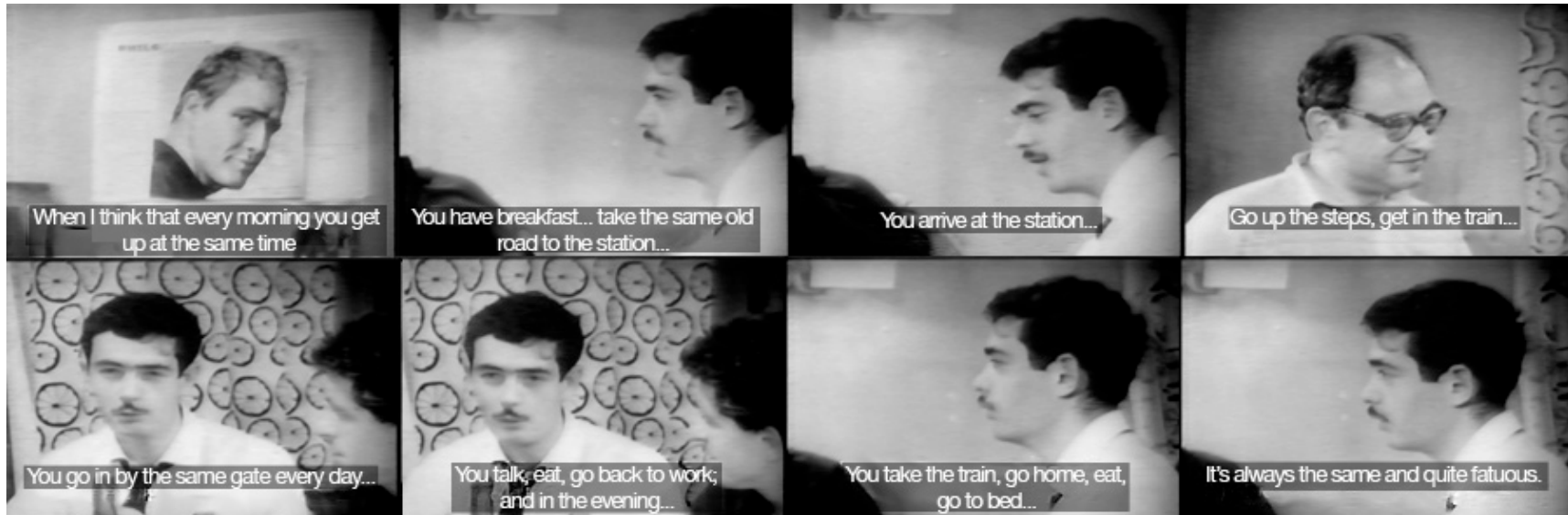
V.2 *Housing Problems* (1935) is probably the first film to deal explicitly with its titular topic. It was ground-breaking for a number of reasons, beyond the first ever use of on-camera, face-to-face interviews. Produced by the Commercial Gas Association and filmed on location in Stepney, East London, *Housing Problems* interviews slum-dwellers and residents recently re-housed in new public housing estates. The story is optimistic about public housing, and also makes a passionate case for environmental reform and greater attention placed on public health. (Elton and Anstey 1935; Gold and Ward 1997).

people going about their daily lives. As a genre, verité is less overtly concerned with capturing the space and motion that inspired Vertov's urban montage in *Man with the Movie Camera*. Its basic impulse is to represent social relations as they happen, without direction or scripting. And it does so by experimenting with existing techniques and tropes of documentary: "The interview (a device which was first used with Arthur Elton's and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* in Great Britain in 1935 [see image V.2]); the biographical format (as old as Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, 1922); the kaleidoscopic portrayal of city life (first attempted in Germany with Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of*

a Great City, 1927, and developed further with Vertov's *The Man With the Movie Camera*, 1929); and the recording of ordinary people doing and saying ordinary things" (Barsam 1992:301).

In *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch and Morin go out into the streets of Paris towards the end of the Algerian War and ask people if they are happy. The film's first three shots could be straight out of city symphony: the camera tracks the approach to Paris from its suburbs out a moving train window; it cuts to an early morning traffic signal, and then to a group of people exiting the Paris metro with the superimposed title, *Chronique d'un été (Paris 1960)*, announcing that what we are seeing is an account of quotidian events, rather than, say, a meditation on an abstract theme. Such shots amount to cinematic shorthand for urban exploration. And then a voiceover announces a quite different intention: "This film, made without actors, was lived by men and women, who devoted some of their time to an experiment in filming the truth" (Rouch and Morin 1961). The voiceover never appears in any other point in the film. The first post-title cut takes us to an interior space, where the two filmmakers are discussing with a woman the possibility of acting naturally in front of a camera. Then they start with the questions about her

daily life and end with asking this woman if she would be willing to interview Parisian passersby in the same fashion. The camera then follows this woman, moving at her pace from behind her, out into the streets of Paris. At first, most people ignore this woman-on-the-street interviewer, hurling obscenities or just ignoring her and her co-interviewer. The sequence builds as interviewees answer in greater and greater depth. Some are surprisingly honest "I'm unhappy because I'm old... I've lost my wife" others are evasive "I'm happily married, if that's what you mean" or "Is that a question of philosophy?" or "Paris isn't much fun". Most shots in this sequence include the two women interviewers, with microphone in hand. Eventually, the interviews move inside. Each one lasts longer than the one previous and probes deeper into its subjects' emotional lives. The subjects begin to tell their life stories, and the camera begins to focus on details, a Marlon Brando poster or a music box. Unsurprisingly, most people answers to this question focus on work and home. The final subject tells the camera that he works twenty-four hours a day. His shift may only be nine hours, but the rest of the time, he is sleeping or preparing for his shift.



Chronicle of a Summer (1961): a factory worker describes the tedium of his daily life. The verité approach to documentary is well-suited to presenting individual narratives, whether in the service of exposing social injustice or infusing a spatial exploration with human subjectivity.

The interrupting sound of an alarm clock supports the cut from this worker's plaint to the next 'chapter' in the film and signals the beginning of a new day. While *Chronicle* eschews the text-essay structure of the other documentaries I have profiled, the next group of sequences reveals a distinct sensibility: The same worker – his name is Angelo – wakes up, greets his wife who enters the bedroom with coffee and toast, lights a cigarette, dresses and

leaves his house. Such a scene was nothing short of radical when it first screened. No movie since the advent of sound had allowed people to speak for themselves, unscripted and uncontrolled.

After his breakfast in bed, Angelo heads to work at a Renault factory. The shots of his commute, on one level, reflect the tedium and primacy of work in Angelo's life, as he himself described it when being interviewed. But they are also fascinating

visual descriptions of an unromantic Paris, presenting the cognitive map of one individual's quotidian mobility (See [excerpt 4](#)).

Once at the factory, the camera abandons Angelo and presents medium-shot portraits of a variety of factory workers and their grueling tasks on the automobile assembly line. We see a sequence of workers on their lunch breaks; we see them cleaning up at the end of the day, and then we return to the streets of Paris. The cameraman walks alongside Angelo as he leaves the factory, gets on the bus, exercises in his backyard and reads on his couch

A conversation between Angelo and a young, privileged student from the Ivory Coast named Landry – two men introduced, presumably, by the filmmakers – transitions to the next part of the film. They sit in a stairwell and talk about work, about French social mores compared to those of French colonial Africa, about individualism and the state of the economy. No attempt is made to characterize either man as representative of a particular type. But the interaction – which plays out with all the friendly humor,

Chronicle of a Summer (1961) explores Paris as the cognitive map of Angelo's daily commute.



curiosity and awkwardness likely even if the camera were not there – does read as an urban juxtaposition, elevated to the interpersonal level. In other words, while the film does well not to reduce its characters to informants of a particular demographic condition, each person inevitably becomes a part that speaks for the whole: the film constructs the experiential world of Paris in the summer of 1960 from fragmentary life-narratives of a handful of its citizens. As an exercise that prioritized the social, rather than spatial, analysis, Rouch and Morin were well aware of “the problems and paradoxes – epistemological, aesthetic, and moral – that... inevitably attend this new, apparently more direct way of filming” (Rothman 1996: 80). To address this problematic, their experiment had to concern itself with meta-cinematic issues such as reflexivity and the role of the filmmaker in the unfolding action:

Rouch understood that however ‘invisible’ the man-with-the-movie-camera might make himself, and however unselfconscious the camera’s subjects might appear, filming is a real act performed in the real world with real consequences. He understood as well that sometimes a filmmaker has to forsake the passivity of a place behind the camera to provoke reality into revealing its deepest truths. For Rouch, already a veteran of over a decade of ethnographic filmmaking among the Songhay and Dogon peoples in West Africa, the lightweight synch-sound

equipment became an indispensable instrument of a life-long cinematic enterprise poised between science and poetry, between anthropological research and a personal need to give poetic expression to his conviction that ‘primitive’ societies possess knowledge that modern science must find ways to acknowledge (Rothman 1996:80).

This meta-cinematic reflexivity is apparent from the first scene of the film. It becomes even more overt in a series of interstitial scenes of the filmmakers at a dinner party they have convened to discuss the progress of the film. A new set of characters reflects on the film’s initial questions about happiness and then reflects on the footage Morin and Rouch have shot so far. Soon and seemingly without provocation, though, the polite dinner conversation turns heated when someone brings up the Algerian War. The existential and moral crisis of this conflict, already six years old in 1960, provides a political context that informs the viewer’s understanding of all other scenes in the film.

After an extended series of sequences of leisure, at a beach in St. Tropez and one of the character’s family hiking trip, the camera zooms out to reveal a cinema hall, filled with various characters we have met in the film: Marceline the holocaust survivor,

Marilou the Italian immigrant, Angelo the factory worker, Landry the African student and many others. Many in the audience, including some of the film's main characters, critique the film's "artificial" quality, referring to how awkward and forced many of the subjects seem. Others were embarrassed by the emotional honesty, by feeling like "intruders" as the characters onscreen revealed increasingly deep personal truths. After the screening, Rouch and Morin discuss the critique, remarking how the audience split into two camps, those who found the action forced and those who found it "too true." *Chronicle of a Summer's* final moment finds Rouch and Morin walking the streets, pondering whether their experiment is worthwhile, as it has strayed so far from their assumptions before making it. "This film" Rouch says to Morin "unlike normal cinema, re-introduces us to life ... We wanted to make a film of love. But it's turned out an impersonal kind of film, or if not impersonal, a sort of reaction from reaction, which isn't necessarily sympathetic. It's a job getting anything across. We're in for trouble."

But the film does 'get things across.' A serious student of this film could find much to analyze in the film's exploration of the

relationship between the socio-political ambiguities its characters expose and the postwar urban space they inhabit. But to my mind, the film's contribution to urban discourse is methodological. As mentioned, when the film first screened in 1961, the uncontrolled nature of the dialogue and action was radically new. The subject matter itself – work, life, (post)colonial anxiety and urban malaise – however, was not. The genre of European fiction film that critics and historians refer to as (Italian) neo-realism (approximately 1943 – 1961) had expanded the possibilities of narrative cinema by relating stories of the working poor within their environments. Often – as in the masterpiece of the genre, Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*) – such stories motivated exploratory journeys through actual urban environments in which the city itself was both a character in the drama and the subject of politico-economic scrutiny. Both Andre Bazin and Gilles Deleuze, however, define the genre in terms of its formal construction, as opposed to its subject matter: "...it was a matter of a new form of reality, said to be dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering. Instead of representing an already deciphered real, neo-realism aimed at an

always ambiguous, to be deciphered, real” (Deleuze {1985} 1989:1).

Verité advanced the project of charting a ‘new form of reality.’ It appeared at a time when technical reason was ramifying through a variety of new applied social sciences³⁷ in a planning tradition (Friedmann 1987:62). Simultaneously, however, serious doubts about the “democratic unfreedom” prevalent within a tradition of technical reason (Marcuse 1964:1) were beginning to foment the worldwide current of social protest that came to a head in 1968. One early site of this protest in America was urban renewal. But beyond the philosophical protest against top-down, rational thinking was a methodological challenge to the instrumental use of details – such as a pan from railway bridge to a Lower East Side slum in *For the Living* that functions to *illustrate* “an already deciphered real.” Charting the range of forms this challenge took is outside the scope of this essay. But both *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Death and Life of Great American Cities* took up the challenge by

³⁷ In particular, Friedmann cites the emergence of systems analysis, policy science and organization development in addition to the contributions of Herbert Simon, Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom (1987:62).

juxtaposing observed details in order to *discover* new forms of truth.



Bicycle Thieves (1948) probed the misery of postwar Rome through a father and son’s desperate search for the bicycle on which their livelihood depends. While Italian neorealism, of which this movie is probably the most famous exemplar, is a fiction genre, the real physical environment of the war-ravaged city is a protagonist in the drama. Other examples of this kind of cinematic urbanism include Visconti’s *Obsession* (1943); Rossellini’s *Rome: Open City* (1945) and *Germany, Year Zero* (1948).

Image:
http://www.moviediva.com/MD_root/MDimages/Copy_of_BikeT2.jpg

VI EMPIRICAL IMAGERY: WILLIAM H. WHYTE AND *THE SOCIAL LIFE OF SMALL URBAN SPACES*

Observing behavior in physical settings generates data about people's activities and the relationships needed to sustain them; about regularities of behavior; about expected uses, new uses, and misuses of place; and about behavioral opportunities and constraints that environments provide. – John Zeisel

William Whyte is one of the most passionate observers of the American urban scene to emerge in the past fifty years. Part of this passion stems from his moral vision. In his view, there was a right and a wrong way to think about the relationship of social processes and urban form. The right way requires basing spatial decision-making – from zoning to design – on observation and analysis of social practices. According to architecture critic Paul Goldberger, Whyte “believed with deep passion that there was such a thing as quality of life, and that the way we build cities, the way we make places, can have a profound effect on what kinds of lives are lived within those places” (LaFarge 2000:vii). But this moral vision did not manifest itself in preconceived set of assumptions about how government or designers and planners should deliver that quality of life. The prescriptions for good urban form that he proposed emerged from his observation.

He shared this moral view with Jane Jacobs, whose *Death and Life* grew out of an article, entitled “Downtown is for People”, that he commissioned her to write when he was editor of *Fortune* magazine in 1957³⁸ (Alexiou 2006). But while Jacobs aestheticizes fragmentary observations and extrapolates grand, urban-scale strategies from the narrow perspective of her window on Hudson Street, Whyte seeks the semblance of an empirical method that transcends personal subjectivity to arrive at the persuasiveness of ‘fact’. Jacobs attributed the longevity of her ideas to her belief that they “plumbed the depths of human nature like a good novel” (Martin 2006). Whyte’s work was more often likened to the traditional sociology or anthropology (see e.g. Kayden 2000). In Goldberger’s account, Whyte “was in every way an urban anthropologist, and had the objectivity of a great scientist,

³⁸The article was reprinted in his anthology *The Exploding Metropolis* (Whyte 1993 {1958}).

prepared to gather the evidence and be guided by it” (LaFarge 2000:vii).

But Whyte’s training was not academic. He began his career as a journalist. As a writer, he eschewed any affects in prose, whether scholarly or literary, and preferred the plainspoken style that underscored his profound belief in common sense as a valid criterion for judgment. For example, in a hilarious satirical article for *Harper’s* called “You, Too, Can Write the Casual Style” he lambasts the prevalent “*New Yorker*” prose style where overly-complex sentences belie a writer’s reluctance to take a strong and simple stand on an issue (reprinted in LaFarge 2000:109-114). He had first trained his keen eye for social trends on corporate America, writing a book entitled *Is Anybody Listening? How and Why U.S. Business Fumbles When It Talks With Human Beings* in 1952, and then a series of articles for *Fortune* eventually collected into his 1956 book *The Organization Man*. These books probed deeply into, among other things, generational differences between pre-war individual idealism and postwar professional conformity. His moral view, in these cases, revealed itself through his nostalgia for the Protestant work ethic he considered to be

eroding before his eyes, and his disdain for the rise of innocuous groupthink in corporate practices and social escapism in suburban drift. But, even with matters for which he had a profound personal belief, he would not pass judgment in writing until he had made his case and supported it from his research. His relationship to strict empiricism in that research, however, was never without a dose of wit. None of his methods would hold up to methodological scrutiny; in Whyte’s oeuvre, empirical research is more rhetorical style than rigorous practice.

For *The Organization Man*, Whyte wrote to 150 personnel directors and to 150 corporation presidents to ask if they preferred executives who are “human relations oriented” or “rugged individualists” and inferred from their responses that hiring practices were systematically replacing the entrepreneurial innovation of current business leaders with the more conciliatory ideology of their soon-to-be successors. Another method used to prove this point involved administering the personality tests popular in top companies to senior management, middle-management and a handful of scientists, only to find growing encouragement of qualities he sees as tantamount to mediocrity.

A contemporaneous academic reviewer for a scholarly journal was so taken with Whyte's impassioned and well-reasoned argument and so disturbed by the lack of social-scientific precision that he referred to the book as the work of two authors, Whyte the partisan humanist and Whyte the amateur sociologist. Despite his obvious delight in the book, the reviewer laments that "...without pedestrian methodological discussions, which make sociological journals so boring to laymen, the reader cannot evaluate possible biases that may be involved in his procedures... [He] marshals evidence brilliantly for his thesis... However, his case is weakened – in the eyes of the social scientist – by his lack of concern with methodological problems" (Toby 1957:395).

The critique of Whyte should not suggest that methodological perfection is necessary for observational analysis. Rather, it serves to demonstrate that, for Whyte, the order of operations in a research experiment was more important than the rigor of application. Observation still precedes conclusion in Whyte's work (at least in the telling of it), and from this quality emerges the first aspect of Whyte's philosophical legacy for planning

cinema. The second stems from his chosen tools for the next phase of his career, the investigation of public space on film.

The commercial success of *The Organization Man* allowed him to quit his editorial position at *Fortune* and to focus his observational skills on other passions. He first turned his attention to preserving the open countryside, and soon thereafter set his sights on the city (LaFarge xii). His articles on sensible development and city life recommended his collaboration on New York City's 1969 comprehensive plan. Immediately thereafter, he had a radical idea: he sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the newly planned spaces that were built in response to the 1961 zoning resolution and the 1969 plan. He applied for and secured a grant to form "The Street Life Project", a research group whose mission was the careful observation of people in public space.

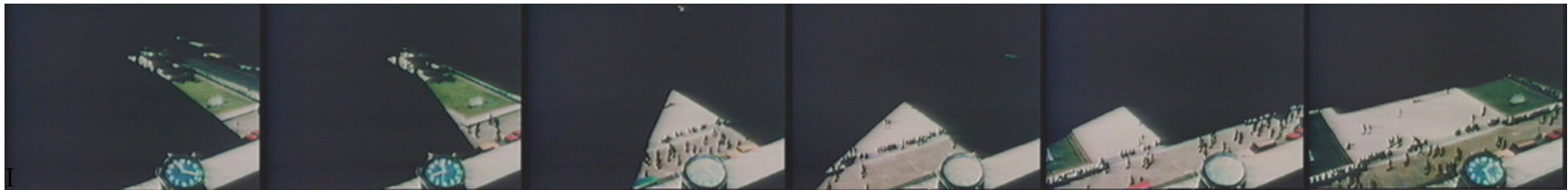
For this undertaking, he chose the 'empirical' tools of filmmaking. He proposed that time-lapse photography provided a valid way to prove, without doubt, how the use of space responds to its form. After ten years of close observation, both through a

variety of cameras and with the naked eye, and focused interviews, Whyte produced a film that summarized his findings, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (1980), released with a book of the same title that reproduces the same argument and evidence. While the book is easier to find than the film, the film is the work that is more often cited, for both his research question and evidence are, by their very nature, kinetic. The socio-spatial practices he wants to document require a medium that can render ‘time, motion and human relatedness’.

The film opens with a timelapse shot of Seagram Plaza (see fig.). Underscored by light-hearted big-band music, the initial shot hammers home the primacy of the timelapse technique by including a clock in the foreground of the shot. Hours go by and shadows move rapidly across the screen in seconds. Whyte’s

voiceover immediately tells the viewer that the shot before his eyes is, in fact, an experiment: “We were testing a hypothesis: the sun, we were pretty sure, would be the chief factor in determining where people would sit, or not sit. Now just after twelve, they begin to sit.”

He immediately calls attention the suitability of his chosen method to the experimental nature of his inquiry. While the production of the film postdates the research project’s findings (and recommendations), the story that the film tells recreates the researchers’ iterative process of hypothesis, experiment, hypothesis testing, and conclusion. But from the outset, he has fun with the conventions of scientific inquiry into social phenomena. On the first page of the book version, he proudly admits his willingness to subvert social scientific traditions. His



The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces (1980): the film’s opening timelapse of Seagram’s Plaza announces the film’s evidentiary approach by clearly stating the method and demonstrating the initial hypothesis.

method involves subverting the ethnographic impulse to study exclusively foreign subjects: "...direct observation had long been used for the study of people in far-off lands. It had not been used to any great extent in the U.S. city" (Whyte 1980:10). Indeed, the ad-hoc anthropology that he espouses includes many references, often humorous, to social and physical sciences. At times, his film alludes to and even satirizes another pseudo-scientific genre of non-fiction film, the nature documentary, complete with a running commentary on the slightly ridiculous social rituals – such as girlwatching or sunbathing – of bizarre human creatures in their natural habitat of daily rest, the urban plaza.

In his comprehensive study of New York City's attempts to provide public space through zoning incentives, Jerold Kayden references the role William Whyte's work played in formulating the City's zoning reforms of the late 1970s. New York City passed the country's first comprehensive zoning ordinance in 1916 and since then, land use controls have been the city's "primary vehicle to create a sense of openness, also known as 'light and air' at street level" (Kayden 2000:7). Kayden goes on to describe, in detail, how the public spaces provided through these

incentives are often "hostile to public use" (Kayden 2000:1). Whyte's approach to New York's public spaces, while highly critical, is more optimistic in tone than Kayden's, because his project is as much about proclaiming his chosen method to evaluate public space as it is about the evaluation as an end in itself. And the combination of common sense and filmic spatial investigation seems to provoke a good-natured delight in the images as he narrates their significance.

Whyte portrays himself and his researchers as open to all possible explanations for why some plazas had many users, and others had few. When he offers a short sequence depicting the vitality of 101st street, he narrates that "we didn't know at the time" that this urban public space exhibited all of the characteristics his research process would eventually uncover as indicative of good urban form. Shots of his researchers, with pen and notebook in hand, are intercut with the objects of analysis, the users. His first conclusion is, "the main problem is not over-use, but under-use." He describes how he then poses the obvious question – obvious, but heretofore unasked – to the city planning commission, who promise him that if the Street Life Project "could nail down the

answer, and back it up with fact, then they would draw a new zoning resolution.” Immediately, the inductive and empirical visual research is no longer about discovering the intelligible world to learn what *is*; it becomes an exercise in the instrumental functionality of what *should be*. While his common sense approach would not allow for anything as drastic as mathematical modeling of inputs and outputs, Whyte here announces his flirtation with the nascent planning tradition of policy analysis (See Friedmann 1987:137-181).

More than any other moment in the history of planning cinema, the moving images themselves become instrumental: they are intended to be used to change New York’s City’s land use laws. But, Whyte continues to entertain quantification, as the research group draws up maps to chart where people sat, and performs more direct observation. When he says, “As you build up the record, a number of patterns begin to appear,” he sets up the expectation that the film is about to dive into these patterns and causal explanations. But, throughout the film, he deftly constructs a playful tension between the empirical and common-sense aspects of his method. Suddenly, close-up shots of individuals

appear. And the “patterns” turn out to be informal social groups, like “girlwatchers” and “lovers.” The visual perspective on these individuals and groups adds another dimension to Whyte’s agenda: most shots are from above at an angle of approximately 30°, a perspective rarely seen in architectural representation (see image VII.2). Indeed, Whyte’s cinematography seeks to rescue urban imagery from architectural vision.



VII.2 Whyte’s evidentiary approach to urban cinematography leads him to shots from high above the social behaviors and interactions being observed.

The next shot of Seagram's Plaza is a revelation (see [excerpt 5](#)). The camera moves, a handheld, walking shot. When Rouch and Morin followed their walking subjects with their cameras in *Chronicle of a Summer*, the effect was a meta-cinematic reflection on reflexivity and voyeurism that mapped one citizen's daily reality. When Whyte does it, the effect is a profound reminder that the camera is equally suited to mimic the experience of plaza user as it is to survey and evaluate her movements from above. And both perspectives generate data:

As we move from the rear, we see another aspect of the place that's quite fascinating: The movement of people across it. The choreography is wonderful and choreography really is the right word. The way people move circle, stop, speed up, the colors they wear, there's a beauty that they must often sense themselves. You see none of this in architectural photographs; they are usually quite empty of people. But visually this movement is the ultimate test of the design. And there's a lot of skill here.

The metaphor of choreography conjures images of Jacobs' sidewalk ballet. The prose of his narration and the cinematography embark on this sensory digression from the experiment simultaneously: the camera is among the people it is observing; the plazas users become more than specimens; negotiating proximity on the street becomes more than a

behavior. In this moment, the methodology seems secondary to genuine enchantment at the unfolding urban dance. And the sincerity of Whyte's tone makes clear that his common sense emanates from a true passion for the whimsy of urban interactions. For the first time in the film, the aesthetics of urbanism eclipse its mechanics.

Soon, though, the camera returns to its perch above the plaza. The research question is reiterated: "Why do some plazas work and others not?" One assumption has been disproved by observation: amount of open space does not correspond to use. When the imagery switches to a series of histograms that he and his researchers have developed that relates such variables as the amount of open space to plaza usage, the film again plays with the irony of his findings' obviousness: after a quickening set of charts and graphs, the film announces, in bold-face type of a title card, his conclusion: "PEOPLE TEND TO SIT WHERE THERE ARE PLACES TO SIT." But this simple lesson is one that very few cities have heeded, we learn. The next set of image-data includes shots of design interventions intended to keep people from sitting on ledges. The following sequence is of

purpose-built benches. He refers to the object in the frame: “this artifact is a design object, the purpose of which is to punctuate architectural artifacts... the dimensions are exquisitely wrong.” This discussion leads Whyte to his first specific recommendation: “Sitting space: one linear foot per 30 square feet.”

The arrival at a recommendation spurs the film to start to make comparisons outside of New York. The next scene shows the great extent of ‘sittability’ in St Marks Square in Venice. The camera slowly zooms out from a close focus on the café seating of St Marks to reveal Whyte’s preferred high angle. “Look closer a great deal of sitting space built into the plaza,” he tells us. When the camera returns to New York, he is ready to deliver another specific recommendation: sitting ledges should be “at least two backsides deep.” Phrasing such a prescription in bodily measurements emphasizes his basic philosophy that design must be in human terms; the user is primary.

The next section revisits Seagram’s to examine a serious concern of land use planners, the challenge of over-crowding. Another timelapse proves that despite the high turnover, the number of

users is conserved. In this case, though, the empirical visual record trumps common sense when it is able to expose the difference between perception and observed fact. For example, a detailed study of Paley Park, with its movable chairs and open relationship to the street seems to demonstrate a strong correlation between sitters and sun. But the assumption is challenged when Paley Park loses some of its sun to a new office building and people visit the park in the same quantities as before. Sometimes, positive qualities of urban space are as unplanned as negative qualities are planned: he discusses the surprising contribution that light reflected off of office buildings offers, which reveals “fascinating potentials for urban design – sun easements for example.” Other sensory qualities follow, such as the sound of water features. And a few more comparisons, such as San Antonio’s riverwalk, a wonderful example of “good enclosure.”

The film’s narrative of experimentation and discovery is circular, bringing the viewer back to 101st Street, where Whyte relates that “only after we had studied many other spaces, that I realize we could have learned all the lessons, right here on 101st street... an

excellently scaled block.” The empirical methodology has ended up supporting common sense. And, to reinforce the inductive methodology of observing facts in advance of arranging them into an argument, the film ends with another timelapse of Seagram’s.

But the intelligent interplay between common sense and empirical method belies a far more powerful motivator of Whyte’s investigation: his passion for cities and their public life. His passionate, moral vision resurfaces in the discussion of his final normative goal for good public space: triangulation. His narration defines triangulation as “that characteristic of a public space that can bring people together, strangers.” For Whyte, this characteristic is the essence of urbanity. And it is also his passion: when his camera catches strangers discussing the comic antics of a mime street performer, he calls it “a nice moment, a city kind of moment.”

If a ‘city moment’ is a moment that brings strangers together in complex urban fellowship, perhaps Whyte’s film perhaps does not stray as far as we might expect from the work of another

sociological outsider, Georg Simmel, whose sensorial urbanism provided the point of departure for this thesis. But on another level, Whyte’s emphasis on spatial details does not allow room for reflection on the abstract (or capitalist) essences of city life that inspired Simmel. Nor does Whyte’s moral vision allow for any blasé detachment from what he observes: the good life to be found in cities is anything but indifferent. In much the same way that Whyte the writer avoids what he considers stylistic flourishes in prose to ‘tell it like it is’, Whyte the filmmaker abandons the tradition of montage altogether, presenting images purely (though not transparently) as evidence in support of his thesis and providing a running commentary on them throughout the film. But is this disavowal of the evocative a necessary outcome of Whyte’s philosophy of learning through looking? Personally, I don’t believe it is. To be fair, Whyte’s intention was not to suggest abstract essences. His purpose was instrumental, to change New York City’s land use strategies (such as density bonuses for poorly designed public spaces), and to a certain extent, he succeeded. But he did believe that in the experiential details of city design lies the proof that such a thing as ‘quality of life’ exists, both environmentally determined and waiting to be

discovered. A term like 'quality of life' lends itself to a normative theory of city form, and is completely distinct from 'sense of place'. But planners and designers need a working understanding of both quality of life *and* sense of place if they are to make decisions affecting the goodness of cities. William Whyte made great strides in advancing the tool of cinema in proving the existence of the former and its immanence in a city's physical form. In the next chapter, I will describe my own process as a maker in attempting to tease out some of the latter.

VII URBAN FILMMAKING IN PROSPECT: VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE 2006

The question that underlies this inquiry is: how can film be used to its maximum effect in urban planning practice. While the majority of my discussion has been historical, I have approached the research question from the point of view of a maker of films and video. My interest in cities and my interest in non-fiction filmmaking come from the same core belief: that exploring the spaces we inhabit gives clues to accessing the complexity of social relations and vice versa. To greater or lesser extents, all of the makers and thinkers I have referenced in this essay share this belief. Therefore, I turned to them when faced with the challenge and opportunity to represent, on video, sixteen world cities for an architecture exhibition. The relevance of my work process narrative is by no means to relate an example of film in a planning context used to its maximum effect. On the contrary, it serves as a first person account of the pitfalls and manifold problematics of exploring city life on video, and to revisit the image-of-the-city topoi from the point of view of a filmmaker commissioned to explore the socio-spatial essences of radically

different political, economic and cultural contexts in a coherent, single display. Furthermore, many of the keywords that have guided my reading of planning cinema's tortuous history: evocative, evidentiary, illustrative, observational, instrumental and intelligible converge and splinter apart in the story of my attempts to rise to the following challenge:

“More than half of the world's population lives in cities”, states the Director of the 10th International Architecture Exhibition, Richard Burdett. “A century ago, it was less than 10%. The 21st century will be the first truly urban era, in which more than 75% of the world's population will live in urban areas, much of it in mega-cities with more than 20 million inhabitants” ... The aim of the 10th International Architecture Exhibition [is] both to inform and provoke a debate on the way we shape the future of urban society, just at the point that cities represent such a critical mass of the global agenda (VAB 2006).

So begins the press release of the Venice Architecture Biennale 2006's International Exhibition, *Cities, architecture and society*. The promotional literature related to this event generally also mentions that this is the first time that an exhibit of this



Introduction to the sixteen cities, entrance to the Corderie dell'Arsenale.
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi



Visitors watching the Mexico City city-video
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi

magnitude – the Venice Biennale is currently the largest architecture show in the world – has directly addressed the challenges and opportunities of contemporary urbanism. The Biennale represents this choice as a deliberate change in tack for the exhibition, which has heretofore concerned itself with the field’s theoretical and aesthetic resonances with visual art: the theme of 2004 was “Metamorph”; 2002 was “Next”.

Indeed, Burdett’s specific take on the theme eschews the conventions of display associated with presenting architecture qua art. His attempt to shift the emphasis away from the tradition of ‘architecture as object’ allows for no architectural models, no renderings, no abstruse design briefs. The approach grows out of a simple and profound belief that the physical form of cities and their social life are inextricable. Therefore, any representation of the built environment that excluded an exploration of the people who inhabit that environment would not fulfill the exhibition’s basic premise.

From January through September of 2006, I worked on this exhibition. My job title was Film/Video Project Manager. In this capacity, I was responsible for generating, by whatever means I saw fit, some sort of audio/video content for sixteen cities around the world.

From the outset, the conceptual approach to the exhibition treated each city as discrete curatorial zones, both intellectually and spatially. Therefore, each city profiled was to have its own video. Immediately, the video content would not be a cinematic exploration of urbanism generally, but of individual cities. To be sure, the cumulative effect, like the cumulative effect of the exhibition on the whole, would hopefully leave the viewer with some impression of the state of contemporary urbanism worldwide. But the individual videos were to engage each city on its own terms. In the nexus of 'physical' and 'social' from which the show drew its inspiration, the videos were meant to illuminate 'the social' in its physical contexts.

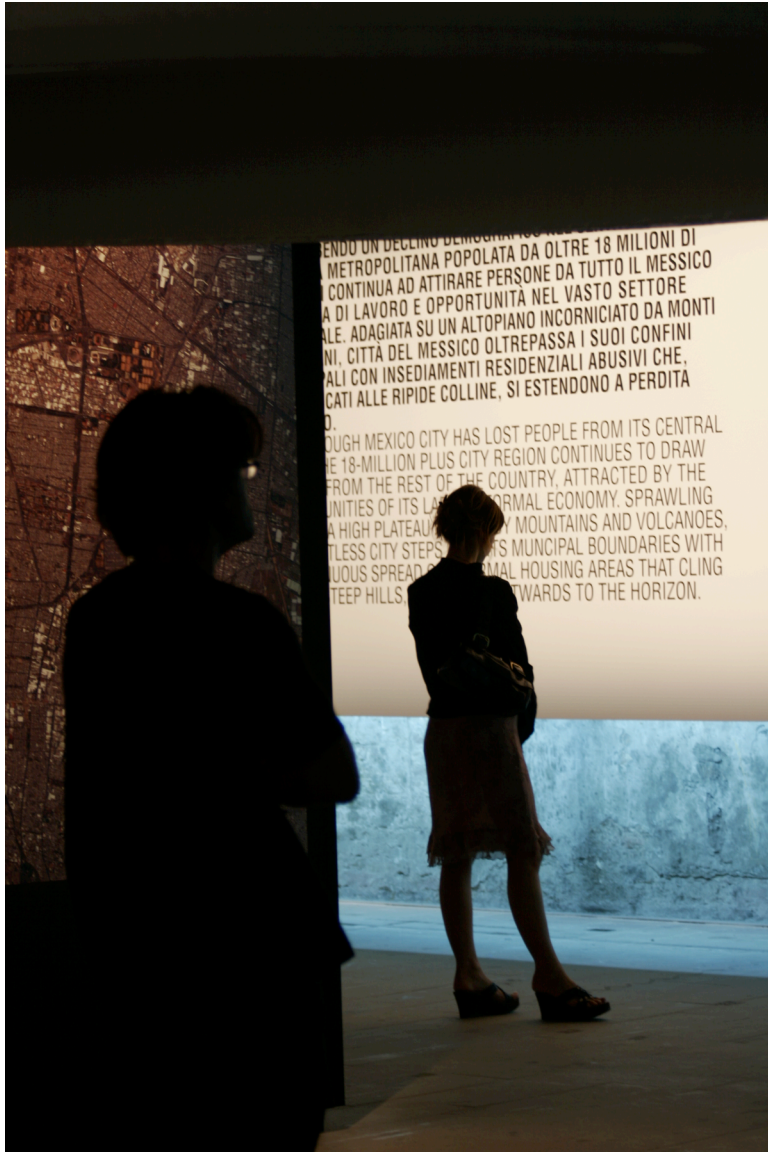
Watching the Los Angeles city-video
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi



In my first conversation with Burdett about the project – a conversation that retroactively became a job interview – he proposed two alternative scenarios for the video component and the person who might preside over the content of such a component. In the first, someone would fly around the world to the cities he had decided to profile and produce (on an impossibly small budget) a short documentary on each city. In the second, someone would work out of his office in London and curate an existing film from or about each city. My reaction was that neither scenario would be sufficient. His conceptual plan for the show struck me as presenting twin challenges in counterpoint. To make the corpus of videos internally consistent would recommend the former, single-maker approach. To make each video resonate with the lived experience of individual citizens would recommend the latter, curatorial approach. I suggested a hybrid. A video project manager should be employed, I argued, to solicit unedited video footage produced by local artists in each city and to procure historical footage of each city from relevant archives. The project manager should then work with Burdett’s research and project team at the London School of Economics and edit the videos in close coordination with the development of

the rest of the content for each city. Perhaps this rather unorthodox method of attempting work both collectively coherent and locally relevant contains lessons for other realms of spatial inquiry attendant to urban planning practice. Perhaps unpacking the assumptions inherent in this method can add something to the growing literature that links cinematic explorations of space to the investigations of context intrinsic to spatial planning and design.

These assumptions center on a handful of terms: montage, collection, rhythm, space and sequence. The first, montage, is the most significant, in that it characterizes the work process and classifies the finished work simultaneously, and it locates the work within an intellectual trajectory of materialist socio-historical analysis that I traced in chapter II. The second, collection, refers, primarily, to my methodological solution to practical constraints. Secondly, the collection strategy I devised manifests my belief in learning a city through looking at it, or shooting first and asking questions later. This order of operations emerges from both William Whyte’s evidentiary style and cinema vérité’s ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach.



COLLECTION: A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

When I was hired to oversee the video component of the Biennale, the relevance of Simmel or Eisenstein, Tugwell or Whyte was far from my mind. All I could think about was how I could possibly achieve what I had been asked to do. I spent a year on my first film and close to three years on my second. How could I possibly create sixteen videos in under nine months? The practical concerns of delivering the commissioned content certainly factored into my decision to compile locally produced and historical footage. Another advantage of this approach was that it would lend to the work a certain ‘polyvocal’ quality. But, again the authenticity that the use of words like ‘local’ and the complexity that the use of words like ‘polyvocal’ help to construct fits within a set of more practical (in terms of budget and schedule) reasons for soliciting footage from external contributors.

From the outset, I characterized the video component as distinct to the data on each city that the team was collecting and processing. To be sure, my intent in so doing was partially to

Reading the Mexico City wall text
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi

attract a certain kind of material shot by people sensitive to formal, as opposed to informational, approaches to urban imagery. In other words, I wanted material from artists. This desire became less and less relevant as the project began to take shape and I was faced with an increasingly limited collection of material, but it was central to my conception. Furthermore, I was interested to acquire material from artists who used video rather than from video artists. Since my idea was radically to repurpose whatever material I could get my hands on, I did not want work from people who identified themselves primarily as filmmakers for fear that the prospect of my altering their work would scare them off. I wanted footage of an artistic nature, but not produced by those likely to balk at its re-orientation from my hand.

One of the first tasks I completed was to write a “Request for Submissions” (RFS; see figure VII.1). No template exists for such a document, as I am unaware of any other video project conceived in this way. To be sure, participatory filmmaking is a growing genre of documentary practice. But, most often, this form of filmmaking involves the documentarian forming

relationships with, for example, street-children in Calcutta³⁹, giving them cameras, and editing the footage into a narrative of ‘the way they see.’ This approach plays, often quite successfully, with the distinction and power dynamics associated with the subject-author relationship in documentary practice, a relationship that is often problematized in the methodological literatures of those social sciences that employ such methods, especially visual anthropology. However, the contortion of the subject-author distinction in most participatory documentary work continues to thematize the participants’ gaze as an object of documentary study. In my case, I was not interested in making work about the way a non-representative group of local filmmakers see ‘their’ city, even though I was interested in soliciting a more nuanced gaze than I myself could attempt as an outsider. While the ‘local-ness’ of the footage I wanted was indeed an integral piece of my project design and guided the way I eventually edited each video, the acquisition method, location and origin of footage was subordinate to the content of the images procured.

³⁹ see the award-winning *Born Into Brothels* (2004) by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman

The language that I ended up using for the RFS drew heavily on preliminary conversations I had with my colleagues on the curatorial team. By this point in the curatorial process (mid-January), the exhibition seemed likely to include at least three interstitial rooms that would highlight themes that cut across all the cities in the exhibition. Mobility, density and public space became the chosen themes. In addition to these trans-urban comparisons, the research into each city prioritized links between the chosen cities and local, regional and global networks. I attempted, in the RFS, to suggest a physical manifestation that corresponded to these themes and flows.

Once produced, the next challenge was to figure out where to send it. I started with my own, limited network of colleagues and acquaintances working in some sort of video production in any of the cities. This covered the two cities where I had previously done work as a filmmaker, New York and Mumbai, and the one where I had the most friends, Los Angeles. I wrote to everyone I knew who might know of viable contacts in each city.

More than once, the social scientific data collection methodology of ‘snowballing’ came to mind. While my project did not require any kind of scientific rigor (though it can certainly be criticized for the lack of it), I nonetheless kept thinking in the terms of gatekeepers and respondents, self-selectivity and bias. The next step was to send the RFS to cultural institutions in each city, post it to relevant internet lists of artist opportunities, and continue to mine the contacts of colleagues and friends for more gatekeepers.

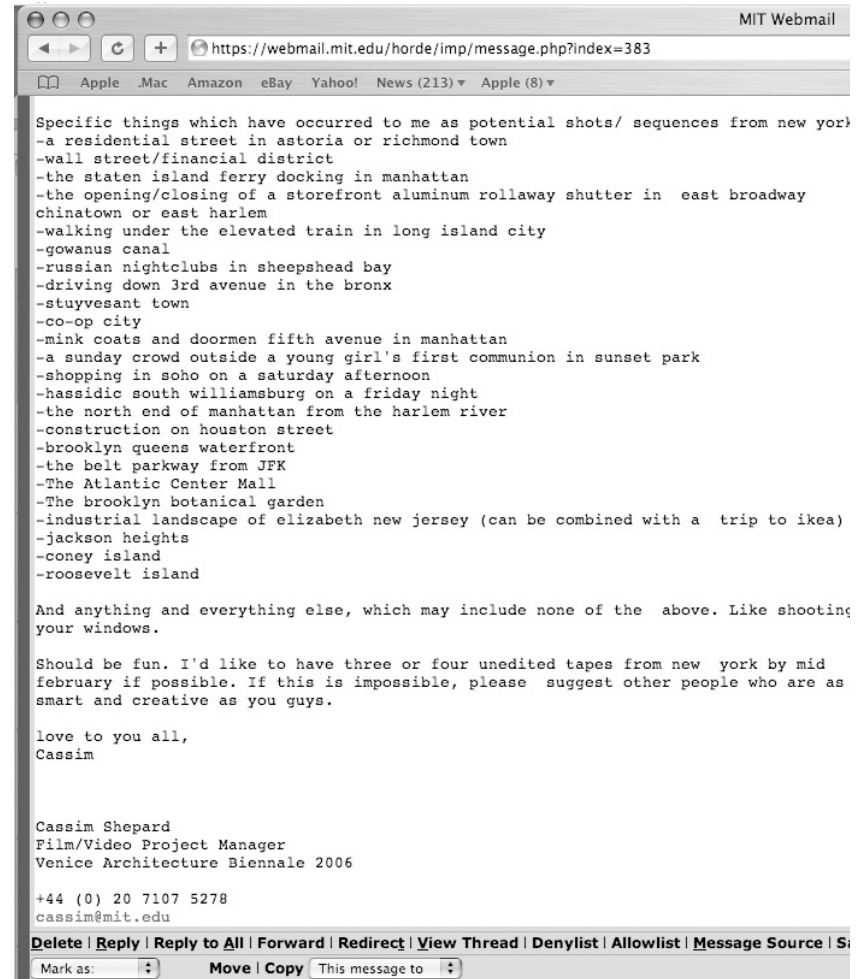
I knew some cities well enough to come up with a suggestive list of sites (see image VII.2) that I thought would reflect the themes I was interested in exploring: “flows of capital, of migration, of urbanization.” In particular, I was interested in points of contact between the contrasting socio-economic and cultural realities of each city, as an efficient (and hopefully poignant) way of referencing the complexity of each urban situation. And from these lists I was able to extrapolate, based on research, analogues in the cities that I did not know as well.

In revisiting these documents now, more than a year after beginning the project, I can begin to see the ways in which the

montage principle, as exemplified by the city symphonies of the 20s and 30s, began to emerge as the best way to respond to the challenge before me. I was not consciously intending to make specific allusions, but in retrospect, images I suggested in these emails such as “-the staten island ferry docking in manhattan” and “-the opening/closing of a storefront aluminum rollaway shutter on east broadway” correspond directly to the visual lexicon of Ruttmann and his peers. I wrote to a video curator in Istanbul with a similar list:

I am looking for evocative shots that go beyond the visual clichés that most people associate with Istanbul. I don't want any shots of the Blue Mosque or Topkapi or the Grand Bazaar, but rather shots that illustrate the complexity of street life in Cihangir or Fatih or Bostanci, or butcher shops next to roman aqueducts in Zeyrek, rich kids waiting outside nightclubs in Ortakoy, vestiges of Greek and Jewish influences in Fener and Balat, suburban sprawl in places like Bahcesehir, and the vast gecekondu such as, for example, Sarigazi.

More than just a list of diverse neighborhoods, this email represents what had been, for me, Simmel's onslaught of unexpected, momentary impressions. These are the images that lingered in my memory from when I had the opportunity to experience Istanbul when I lived there in 2001. Anyone who has



VII.2 Excerpt of an email to potential New York contributors

spent any time in that city can call out a similar list of different neighborhoods that are no less fascinating or ‘representative.’ But these were the sites and images that struck me as having the potential, when juxtaposed, to evoke some aspects of Istanbul that I thought might be relevant to the exhibition.

I suppose that the more traditional work process of writing some sort a script about each city and then commissioning exactly the shots required for that script never really occurred to me, or never seemed practicable. While I wanted to apply the evocative power of montage as used by a planning filmmaker like Pare Lorentz, I wanted to avoid the strategy associated with this approach of illustrating some preconceived and scripted argument. I think part of why I jumped at the idea of each video as a montage whose ultimate form would be guided by a diversity of shots, from different makers in different time periods, stems from the synergy I see between cinematic montage and urban experience. When I think of a city, I think of details, fragments, isolated actions: the parts that speak for the whole. Maybe everybody does. And this impulse is certainly shared by the city-symphony filmmakers. According to film scholar Henry Jenkins,

The cinema was the ideal apparatus for recording the diversity of urban experience. Cinema was an art form based on sequencing and juxtaposing image fragments to construct a more meaningful whole. Cinema could give shape to collective experience, while retaining the particularity of individual narratives (Jenkins 2001).

But, as a filmmaker, I’m less interested in formulating a structure that will absorb these details into a monolithic narrative. Rather, my belief in montage inspires me to play with the position of each fragment relative to its adjacent fragments to build ‘from the ground up’ a series of juxtapositions that resonate with a perceived experience of the city.

By March, material began to trickle into my office in London. In the meantime, I had been spending a lot of time visiting film archives in New York, Washington DC and London to collect historical footage. Part of my decision to use archival footage came from the same desire to force the ‘polyvocal’ idea and give it a material dimension. In other words, the inclusion of different textures and grains – black and white, sepia, various formats of video – would make the multiplicity of vision more overt. As I wrote in the RFS, “Utilizing a variety of film, video and sound material from different media-makers in different time periods

will allow the video projections to approach the pluralism of each city and the subjectivity of each urban encounter.” Furthermore, the historical change of urban form and the rapid acceleration of urbanization were key motivators of the curatorial strategy. Every description of the event began with the historicizing fact that 2006 is the tipping point, according to the United Nations, after which more than half the world’s population will live in cities. While I was never interested in anything as facile as presenting before and after comparisons, I did want to reference urban change in a visual way. In a letter I wrote to Ricky shortly after meeting him, I attempted to justify the use of archival film:

One device that could sharpen the focus is archival film footage in juxtaposition with the newly captured video footage. That way, the affect of the flows you seek to highlight as essential to understanding the evolution of cities over the past century can unfold through a series of temporal, comparative juxtapositions. Such juxtapositions could emphasize the city as palimpsest, rather than a static reflection of the contemporary moment (which is what too many architecture exhibitions are these days anyway).

I’m not sure that I’m capable of separating the formal impulse (multiple visual textures) from the narrative impulse (suggestive of historical change). But in both contexts, I had to guard against allowing too much nostalgia into my editing room. The

exhibition could not be a lament for older forms of urban development. It had to be a challenge to respond to the reality on the ground today. But no discussion of today’s reality, especially in the realm of the built environment, can evade reference to its origins and earlier incarnations. My collection of archival film, to be juxtaposed with contemporary, was intended to make those references.

I looked for similar things in the historical footage as I did in the contemporary: human activity in the context of infrastructure, marketplaces and public spaces. In many cases, the best material available in the archives I was accessing came from amateur outsiders, privileged tourists of the 1930s and 40s. In others, it came from local newsreels. I saw footage Thomas Edison shot in Mexico in 1898 and a 1970s BBC documentary about the luxury Blue Train of Johannesburg. I saw industrial films about the Tokyo office worker of the 1930s and a travelogue that catalogued the monuments of London and Barcelona. As this process unfolded, I began to worry less about whether contemporary footage was from sites I deemed relevant. My sifting through archival film reminded me once again, that an

evocative simulacrum of an urban experience can be composed from the most unlikely images, as long as you get the juxtaposition right.

By mid-April, I had several hours of archival footage in my hands and tapes flying in from all over the world. I had been editing constantly throughout the early spring. When a tape would come in I would watch it, capture the shots I found interesting onto my computer, then isolate the approximately twenty to thirty seconds of material in an hour-long tape that were exceptional. My calculus of quality versus content criteria in making these selections is impossible to determine. But my collection of shots was growing steadily.

Around this time, though, I realized that in some of the cities I would have to do some shooting myself to complement what I had received from others. I visited Cairo and Mexico City for the first time, and returned to Berlin and Istanbul. Traveling to these cities reminded me of the vital importance of the third term that defines the relationship between my chosen method and the subject of cities: rhythm.

RHYTHM I

SHOOTING THE STREET: MEXICO CITY

When I call to mind cities I have visited in my life, I see a progression of image fragments: my memories arrange themselves visually. But, as I continued to discuss the cities I was working on with colleagues and friends, I began to notice how many people would remark on themes that were aggregate rather than fragmentary: the pace of life in a particular city, or its size, or its density. Perhaps my enthusiasm for a montage-approach had led me to discount the importance of singular, totalizing essences of the city in favor of details, partial glances. I did have ideas about each city, supplemented by cursory research into their urban conditions. But perhaps I was overly self-conscious in my resistance to anything that might suggest an imposition of some oversimplified cliché onto a city I was meant to represent.

I began to sketch out some terms that I thought would help guide my next pass at each montage. For New York, words like “archipelago”, “vertical”, and “transaction” kept popping into my head when I watched the footage I had collected. For Mumbai, “proximity” and “invisibility” came to the fore; for Cairo, it was

“rooftops”, “monochrome” and “monument”; while for Istanbul, “palimpsest” and “the centrality of water” took root in my mind and wouldn’t leave. These impressions were no less momentary than the “the opening/closing of a storefront aluminum rollaway shutter on East Broadway” or “the butcher shops next to roman aqueducts in Zeyrek.” The difference is that the words and phrases I would come up with would not be actions or images, but abstractions. Perhaps, in a project that is by its nature superficial (five minutes to present a city through image and sound to a viewer who will most like walk quickly by the screen and catch ten seconds, at most), embracing the essentialist abstraction is necessary, even productive.

If you fly into Mexico City on a clear night, the scale of the city will overwhelm you. The city’s lights extend beyond the horizon in all directions. At first, it is an undifferentiated mass. But soon, electric constellations appear; lights agglomerate in certain areas, disperse in others. As we landed, I wrote down the preliminary terms that would hopefully guide my supplementary shooting in Mexico City, “scale” and “polycentrality.” I was excited to shoot; I hadn’t shot anything in over a year. My time in Mexico City was

limited to six days. In contrast, when I shot a documentary in Fiji, I lived there for a year, and spent the first couple months familiarizing myself, collecting impressions gradually and without time pressure. But in Mexico I had to hit the ground running.

At first, this pair of terms should lead directly to a fairly obvious shooting strategy: identify multiple centers, relatively spread out; go and shoot them. Thinking in this way led to many un compelling shots from far away. When I looked at my footage at the end of the day, I would see distance rather than scale. No action guided the drama of a shot; networks of motion were undifferentiated. The material was terrible, and I was very discouraged.

I decided to leave my camera at home and wander the city. Only then did I recognize that something was conspicuously absent from my conception of possible themes. All of the words that had occurred to me – scale, polycentrality – were primarily visual, or had some obviously visual manifestation. It was not visual abstractions that I had mistakenly ignored. It was the rhythm of



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, MEXICO CITY: **SCALE** (clockwise from top left: Nezahualcoyotl, or Neza, from a helicopter; the city from the viewing platform at Torre Latinoamericana; Avenida Reforma; the end of the agglomeration at Chalco)

each city that I had taken for granted, assuming it would emerge from the process of editing months later. The rhythm of Mexico City is anything but uniform. On the contrary, the diversity of tempos complicates an already complex urban condition. In a city I did not know at all, I realized I had to identify immediately shooting locations that could reflect this diversity of tempos. But this challenge, as I have defined it, risks conflating urban tempo with cinematographic pace. They are very different things. Again,

the all-important distinction between a choice of content and a method appropriate to render that content had to be drawn.

With rhythm in mind, I could think of several well-worn methods at my disposal. A common trope in urban shooting is the handheld, walking shot. This technique has its advantages: it can capture the spatial flows of the pedestrian, the experience of passing strangers in the street, or the disorientation of walking in the city. But it has nothing to do with the way the eye sees. It is often used to attempt a kind of naturalism, but it evokes reality only insofar as it alludes to a technology of verisimilitude associated with documentary film practice rather than the sensory experience of place.

Still frustrated, I revisited lessons from my undergraduate film classes. Until the 1960s, shooting film rarely took place in the street. While early cinematic experiments celebrated the vitality of street life, the economics of production and the mass entertainment function that cinema came to serve – coupled with cumbersome, heavy cameras and the incredible expense of film stock and equipment – soon pushed virtually all filmmaking into

purpose-built studios. With the proliferation of lightweight, relatively inexpensive film (and eventually video) cameras in the late 1960s and 70s, amateurs had access to filmmaking technology for the first time since cinema's first generation. The resistance to normative models of commercial film that this engendered led to range of formal experiments and a renaissance of documentary practice, a renaissance dated to the debut of *Chronicle of a Summer* in 1961. Filmmaking returned to the street, most and, suddenly, tripods were no longer necessary to support heavy cameras. Handheld cinematography was embraced largely out of necessity. However, over the years, handheld shooting came to evoke, in both fiction and non-fiction film, a 'documentary aesthetic.' This aesthetic has become narrative shorthand for realistic, but, as someone searching for new ways to capture the experience of place, I found it to have the opposite effect. It is an artifice that does not relate in any meaningful way to perception.

Film is a time-based medium. As such, speed is a concept that is relatively easy to capture. The most basic understanding of cinematography holds that if a camera-operator were to shoot from a moving vehicle, some aspect of the experience of traveling

at that speed would come across in the resulting film image. (Just as the most basic understanding of film editing holds that a rapid succession of short images will convey another type of speed.) Such techniques of rendering speed do not necessarily illuminate anything about the phenomenology of pace of life in a real-world context, though they can be used to great narrative effect. But I wanted to find images that reflected the experience of place without resorting to these stratagems just yet. For even without using such techniques, or indeed without using more sophisticated ones, the film image is already a subjective representation. Framing an image, pressing record at a decisive moment, following an action with the camera – shooting requires constant choices, countless acts of erasure and interpretation. Where, then, is the experience of urban rhythm located within the moving image? Do the temporal qualities of a city make themselves known through the speed of cars passing or pedestrians crossing the street? I suspected there was more to it than that. But I still didn't know exactly what I was looking for.

Rhythm is a musical metaphor that implies the regularity of a beat. But the beats of urban life do not occur at regular intervals.

Rather, actions overlap and intersect. Walking around Mexico City, thinking about the various techniques of shooting that might be able to convey what I was experiencing, I found myself at the entrance to Chapultepec Metro Station. It is a border zone of sorts. To the east lies the middle-class and increasingly gentrifying Zona Rosa, and to the west stretches the vast Chapultepec Park. It is a bus depot, a mid-sized informal market, and a commercial retail strip. I set up my camera. Without moving, only using my zoom and slight positional adjustments for framing, Mexico City's diversity of tempos found me:

Businessmen exit the Metro. A group of kids stand in a circle, smoking. Two teenagers, dressed in black and scowling, browse the selection of sunglasses. A shoe-shiner awaits a patron. Next to him, his neighbor finishes polishing the shoes of an immaculately dressed man in a suit. The words ENGLISH LESSONS have been painted in blue on the side of a building. An elderly driver washes the window of his pesero. Several other minivans pull up to the corner. Passengers disembark; other board. A pop song I recognize as Romanian blares from one stand. A Mexican song competes from the adjacent one. I'm not sure what is being sold inside either. A wire-mesh ladle rescues tostadas from a vat of boiling oil. A woman's purse is dangling from her forearm – not her wrist or elbow but somewhere in between. There is a line outside the ATM.

Shooting this zone of multiple encounters, I decided that maybe rhythm does not exclusively flow from a moving vantage point. Again, my search for a way to capture an abstract, overarching essence led me to a series of individual moments.

Armed with a renewed trust in the fragmentary, in the part speaking for the whole, I was again able to shoot with confidence. From Chapultepec, I took the metro to La Merced, what used to be Mexico City's largest wholesale market and now houses a growing population of Chinese immigrants, and caught the cacophonous putting away of tin merchandise against a purple sky (see [excerpt 6](#)). Here too, I looked for moments, tiny narratives of daily rhythms, that coalesced into a larger story about markets, about global and local circuits of capital in a city-region, but equally about the color and light of this city. Say what you will about industrial pollution, but it makes for some spectacular colors at sunset.



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, MEXICO CITY: **RHYTHM** These shots from La Merced demonstrate a montage approach to a single, geographically bounded area of the city, intercutting individual spatial practices with wider-scale images of the market environment. See excerpt.



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, MEXICO CITY: **RHYTHM** This sequence demonstrates a non-proximate and non-coeval montage approach, where the space of the city is collapsed in order to explore resonances between diverse locations in different historical periods: (left to right: storefronts in Neza, Centro Histórico in 1958, the landscape of trash near Chalco, and the famous Ángel de la Reforma in the late 1930s).

I wandered the picturesque streets of Coyoacán, trying to structure shots of the odd, acute angles of the colonial street plan and the tourists poring over mass-produced Frida Kahlo images. I hopped in a cab to Santa Fé, a massive commercial development of office towers and security guards. I took a series of *peseros* to Neza, a baffling informal settlement that has arranged itself on a street grid, where vendors sell dented hubcaps and the lonely halves of pairs of shoes. Near Neza, I braved the stench of a landfill that seemed to stretch into infinity. I drove under the Segundo Piso, a quixotic *grand projet* intended to circumscribe the city in an elevated highway. I went to Avenida Presidente Masaryk in Polanco, Mexico City's swankiest neighborhood, where impossibly beautiful women dart in and out of Prada, Chanel and Armani stores (oddly, Polanco was where I felt the most uncomfortable shooting; I felt a lot more welcome in the slums). And I ended up back in La Condesa, where I was staying, and finished the week reveling in the framing of pampered children on swing-sets, flower-stands, green Volkswagen Beetle taxicabs, and Art Deco architectural details.

I returned to London with a lot of good material. And a new challenge presented itself, how could I arrange sequences that did not represent the city in the cliché of its socioeconomic contrasts? To be sure, the proximity of global capital to entrenched poverty in Mexico City was something I wanted to express. But how could I accomplish this without reducing each individual action to an illustration of an economic, and therefore supra-human, condition?

The answer was to revisit the keywords that had enabled me to compose interesting shots after an initially discouraging first two days on the job: scale, polycentrality, a diversity of overlapping rhythms. Keeping these concepts in mind as I edited might not have precluded the generalizations I was trying to avoid from seeping into my sequences. But, as guiding principles, they steered me towards choosing shots and juxtapositions that resonated with my personal, observed experience of Mexico City rather than my pre-formed, academic knowledge of its socioeconomic reality.



RHYTHM 2

CURATING MOTION & MUSIC: JOHANNESBURG

Several times, someone who responded to my call for footage wanted to play a more active role in the creation of the city-video. In most cases, I felt that the artists in question would make work that would stand out, detracting from the cohesive feel I was attempting in the corpus of video work. However, in Johannesburg I was introduced to an artist who, from our earliest conversation, seemed to understand instinctively what I wanted the city-videos to be. Ismail Farouk describes himself as an urban geographer. He researches urban poverty and informal housing for an architectural practice. But for several years, he has quietly been assembling his vast collection of digital photographs of Johannesburg into short and silent Flash animations. I have never seen anything quite like them. Farouk succeeds in making live-action movies without a motion picture camera. In the process, he subverts and reinvents narrative time again and again within a given work, redefining what rhythm can mean in a non-fiction context by using it as a figurative device.

Watching the Mexico City city-video
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi

Film scholars have attributed the perception of motion in film to the “persistence of vision”, a concept borrowed from early twentieth century psychology. While this term has since been proven to be imprecise in psychological terms (Herbert n.d.), it still holds sway in film studies. Film in “real-time” is made up of twenty-four still frames per second. Video is not made up of sequences of still images, but rather constantly moving pixels. However, video image sequences are understood to correspond to 29.999 frames per second. Ismail’s sequences generally consist of about seven images per second. Each image is held for four frames out of thirty.

If an editor were to hold a single frame for four frames from a sequence that was shot in “real-time”, the effect would be what we think of as slow motion. If an editor were to accelerate a “real-time” image sequence so that only 7/30’s of a second (in equal intervals) were seen, the effect would be fast motion. Farouk’s sequences are neither slow nor fast motion in the traditional sense. While they are certainly fast-paced, the images are not taken from a moving sequence, and so the motion is one of stops and starts. Jerky is one way to describe the kind of

motion they convey, but it is not entirely irregular. Percussive might be a more accurate term. As such, they go particularly well with music, especially music with a pronounced beat.

I have never been to Johannesburg. (Finding a talented local filmmaker with as much urban sensitivity as Ismail Farouk meant that I couldn’t justify visiting the city myself, unfortunately.) But, as it happens, I am a huge fan of South African music, particularly kwaito. Kwaito is now a pan-African phenomenon, with acts springing up from Nairobi to Dakar, but it originated in Johannesburg. Musically, it blends African percussion, Western house and hip-hop genres, beats and melodies sampled from pre-existing musical sources, and often overlaid with Zulu-inspired chanted choruses. Socially, kwaito is often compared with American hip-hop in terms of its association with urban youth culture and social resistance. And when I assembled a few of Ismail’s flash animations, juxtaposing them with archival film I had collected of diamond mines, township street life in the 1930s and the bustling financial district in the 1970s, an identifiable musical rhythm appeared. A particular kwaito track seemed to match the meter, a song called “50-50” by kwaito superstar

Mandoza. The selection of this song brings up the problem of music generally, and so bears a more detailed explanation as a way of reflecting on the music selection process more generally throughout the sixteen videos. At first, Farouk hated this song. In fact, it was his dissatisfaction at the prospect of my using it with his images that inspired him to pursue a more authorial role for himself in the Johannesburg video in the first place (in a plaintive email to me, he equated the selection to underscoring photos of modernist architecture with a Britney Spears song!) The negotiation process about this particular song helped me to articulate the role music was playing in all the videos.

From the start, Ricky Burdett had wanted more music qua music than I had originally envisioned. My own conception had been to focus on street sounds, with bits of incidental music woven in, as if coming from a shop around the corner or a passing car stereo. I intended to make the soundtrack highly stylized, with multiple layers of expressive sound overlaid. But I wanted the sonic montage to read as diegetic, that is, emanating from the time-space of the video sequence. In the rough cut screenings that occurred every month or so, this issue would repeatedly arise, and

it was a constant give-and-take. The exhibit designers had designed a sound bell, a cylindrical housing for the speakers. Within the area directly underneath the sound bell, the sound of the video would be all-encompassing. Immediately outside the bell, the sound level would drop dramatically and serve as a subtle environmental texture for the rest of the city profile. I was excited and daunted by the prospect of the sound-bells (see image VII.3). Their presence (and prominence) meant that the soundtrack of the videos was in many ways more important than the image-track in that the audio's function would extend to more components of each city profile than the video would do. For me, this curatorial choice further motivated the soundtrack to be expressive but somewhat naturalistic. Moreover, songs would date the work and distance the viewer still further from the immediacy of the images. For some of my colleagues, however, the need for multi-purpose audio was part of the worry about holding a viewer's attention for 300 meters worth of dense content (much of it fact-heavy text). Each video involved its own audio negotiation. In final form, every video has more non-diegetic music than I would like and less than Ricky would like. But one musical choice of which I was able to convince him was

that the music should be from the city in question. I categorically refused to accede to the current trend in exhibition video sound: an ambient drone and thumping techno-beat that aspires to global placelessness but actually locates the work within conventions of self-consciously hip euro-centrism.



VII.3 Mumbai sound-bell. Photo: Gian Luca Poggi

But choosing music that was ‘of’ the place I was trying to represent was also problematic. All forms of popular music are loaded with the connotations of the subset of the population that

listens to them. Even though none of my choices of images or sites amounted to thorough cross-sections of a city, a particular song is a much less shared (or public) urban amenity than a particular street corner. Thus, the selection is even more burdened by the specter of representational issues. In the cities I visited or knew well, I could rely on the same experiences that helped me come up with lists of desired images. For example, a vivid sense-memory I have from living in Brooklyn is young Latino men driving slowly down Myrtle Avenue with their windows down and their stereo system blasting reguetón . So, in the New York City video, I mimicked this experience with the Zion & Lennox’s hit track “Yo Voy” under a sequence of shots of the Manhattan Bridge and Jamaica, Queens (see [excerpt 7](#)). In Cairo, I was lucky enough to have a large amount of Egyptian and Arabic pop music recorded on my video footage. While music on the videotape makes manipulating the sound-image relationships a lot more difficult, when necessary I could find a recording of the song in question. But I didn’t know what the latest music to be heard on Johannesburg’s streets is. And I could hardly tell Ismail Farouk what his city sounded like when I had never been there. I was not married to the idea of using a very

popular kwaito track and remained open to many other kinds of South African music. But Ismail's idea was to use the avant-garde music of a friend of his, whose compositions, while more artful than most ambient music, lack an environmental quality and certainly would not be heard on the streets of Johannesburg. Furthermore, the reason I was so drawn to Ismail's video work was its kinetic quality, and to use music without a strong beat element risked undermining the rhythm of the image-track rather than underscoring it.

In the end, we used a little of both (see [excerpt 8](#)). Of the videos for which I played more of a curatorial rather than directorial role, my collaboration with Ismail was the most iterative and the most productive (and involved the most compromise on both our parts). He sent me some of his pre-existing, silent animated jpeg sequences. I ordered them, juxtaposed them with archival and set them to music. I asked him to locate or record some ambient street sound and sent him my first pass. He sent me selections of his preferred music choice. We discussed it. I also spoke with Ismail's composer and tried to explain the sense of place that I wanted the soundtrack to evoke. Then Ismail would send me a cut. I would provide detailed feedback. We would

talk on the phone. He would send another cut. I would cut it up on my computer to show him where I thought certain juxtapositions weren't resonating as much as they could. One of the problems with Ismail's work was that his intricate, frame-by-frame approach lent itself to the creation of a dense text with multiple meanings in each sequence. Such a strategy leads to a much stronger work of art than anything I produced in this project. But it also leads to a less successful exhibition piece. For example, he wanted to layer multiple images to problematize the state's unchecked expropriation powers in the name of urban development: specifically, the imminent housing demolitions in advance of "the urban development" of the next World Cup. It didn't read. It was, in fact, distracting from the face-value of the images, the textures and angles of the housing and the choreography of exuberance evident in the soccer game.

With work that is punctuated by brief, distinct pauses and sudden surges of motion, rhythmic is perhaps too easy of a label. But what makes the Johannesburg city-video successful is how Ismail grafts the rhythmic qualities of his city onto urban actions and interactions such that an inherent choreography is exposed rather than imposed.



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, JOHANNESBURG: CHANGE

Simple before-and-after juxtapositions of still images (like this one) can show urban change; the same juxtaposition of moving images can illuminate how that change manifests in spatio-temporal terms: what kinds of mobility are enhanced or inhibited by the social, commercial and legal ramifications of this corner store becoming a KFC?

SEQUENCE: PROBLEM-SOLVING IN BERLIN AND ISTANBUL

Working with Ismail forced me to articulate my priorities to someone else who was invested in creating urban imagery, understood the pitfalls and the possibilities. In other cases, opportunities to verbalize what I was doing were few. I had regular meetings with Ricky, colleagues and advisors to show rough cuts and discuss. Understandably, these helpful discussions tended to focus on the city and its relevant themes rather than specific strategies to capture them.

Each city, and each video, presented its own problems, both conceptually and practically. The former type of problem often grew from the abstraction I held in my head while shooting or editing. Sometimes it was a reversal. For example, in Berlin I wanted to find and shoot images of the abundance of space, and the creative uses of it. The resulting problem was how to frame space in a way that privileges the space, rather than the surrounding architecture.

Any filmmaker will agree that absence is the hardest thing to capture on film. Perhaps the same could be said for any two-

dimensional visual art. Through a viewfinder as it is onscreen, the geometric relationship between the visible forms and the frame are what define the shot. In other words, if one sets out to film an empty street or bottle or room, the street and the bottle and the room will determine the shot's meaning, not the emptiness.

As an urbanist-in-training, I have been conditioned to fetishize public space. And in my attempt to become an urbanist-filmmaker, I have come to appreciate the points of contact between different social groups that can be found in most types of public space (such as parks, for example). I do not think of urban design as the spaces between the buildings, but the practical limitation of my chosen keyword for Berlin, “the abundance of space”, was that it led me to shots of the buildings that frame the space, rather than the other way around.

Thinking about this problem in philosophical terms got me nowhere. I had to address it as a practical problem that just might have a practical solution. In retrospect, the answer seems obvious, but, given the assumptions that guided me through this process – the richness of the street, the perceptual naturalism of

the static shot, the fragmentary resonance of close-ups on individuals in action – I took some time to solve the problem. The solution: find shots from above (see [excerpt 9](#)).



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, BERLIN: **ABUNDANCE OF SPACE**
(clockwise from top left: U-Bahn in Kreuzberg, 1932; cranes above Brandenburg Gate; Alexanderplatz; social housing in Marzahn).

In some cases, the issues to address were ethical. In Istanbul, I had to face the thorny issue of aesthetics, or more precisely, aestheticizing the city. I had the opportunity to live and work in Istanbul for three months in 2001, and I have considered it my favorite city ever since. Translating why it has always appealed to me was not particularly difficult. For much of why it looms large in my memory and general passion for urbanism stems from its physical form – the vistas that the topography creates and the visible layers of history in both the architecture and urban fabric. But the social life that inhabits this physical form is the true determinant of Istanbul’s character. To my mind, the city’s unique brand of secular Islam – in which a rigorously practiced religion is more tradition than faith – its fierce nationalism, and the palpable overlap of European, Middle Eastern and Asian cultural orientations define Istanbul’s essential character. Beyond these oversimplifications, Istanbul shares many attributes of its urban identity with other mega-cities of the developing world: enormous economic disparities, rapid rural-urban migration, vast squatter settlements, etc. Was thinking about the city in terms of concepts like ‘palimpsest’ a callous evasion of the harsh realities that structure daily life for most Istanbulis? Was attempting to

render the city through shots that clearly were motivated by visual delight a denial of the city’s pressures and exigencies?

As we have seen, montage theory was forged in politics. This history is easy to forget. I wrestled with the political connotations of representation a lot while editing the Istanbul video. The beauty of the shots that I collected (from seven videographers, including myself) threatened to elide the city’s inequalities by turning the video into a meditation on light and shadow rather than mobility or density. In most cases, I think these city-videos attest to the inextricability of these categories of urban qualities. But to do so, a careful balance of content and composition must be struck. The interplay of narrative and formal concerns relies on informed juxtaposition. In the end, my chosen solution for Istanbul was to arrange the sequences spatially, to make the video a journey from the periphery to the center (see [excerpt 10](#)). ‘Aestheticizing’ Istanbul is difficult to avoid. The details that I notice when I wander the city strike me because an aesthetic arrangement of forms, rather than some indication of a sociological condition, catches my eye. Even within the city’s gecekondu, or squatter settlements, physical beauty precedes

social reality in my observation and subsequent recording. (The word itself seems more poetic than quotidian: the literal meaning of *gecekondu* is “to land by night” or “built at night” and refers to an ancient legal loophole whereby what is built after dark cannot be razed.)

This stance is problematic. Kracauer and Grierson’s critique of Ruttman – that the primacy of aesthetic priorities in documentary practice precludes the provocation of political action – could certainly be leveled against my approach, and others would probably go further in attacking my relative avoidance of political or social issues. Again though, the time constraints of the project did not allow for me to dwell on representational dilemmas. I had to make a decision. Deliberately to avoid Istanbul’s physical beauty seemed artificial. Why pretend that Istanbul’s urban form is less intrinsic to its urban character than elements that penetrated more deeply into daily life, such as the city’s extreme housing crisis, religious observance in a fastidiously secular state, or the corrupt enfranchisement of rural migrants? I reminded myself, the format was not appropriate to any thorough

investigation of social issues. But this notion raised a larger issue: the causal link between comprehensiveness and superficiality.



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, ISTANBUL: **BEAUTY**

(Clockwise from top left: Galata Bridge in 1916; The *gecekondu* of Gazi Osman Pasa; the Bosphorus ferry to Uskudar; Beyoglu architecture)

In most sub-disciplines of social theory and cultural studies (including film studies and urban social sciences such as sociology or geography), essentialism has become a dirty word. Its immediate connotations are of reductive generalization, impolitic constructions of otherness, even racism. To take the common critique a step further, essentialism can lead to an intellectually unstable binary: the ideological separation between the postmodern belief in the social construction of culture and the realist belief in the epistemological supremacy of positivism (see Fuchs 2001).

Since the postmodern turn in the social sciences, analyses of how such impulses reify power relations and self/other dichotomies have become a cliché. Recently, an intellectual defense of essentialism has appeared at the margins of many disciplines, from philosophy to psychology (See, e.g. Paul 2006, Xu and Rhemtulla 2001, and Fetveid 2001), but I am not familiar enough with this literature to make the (vainglorious) attempt to locate my work within this emerging tradition. Yet, in my analysis of my own choices in the production of the Biennale videos, I have never hesitated to characterize my attempts to ascribe a coherent

urban identity to a particular city as an essentialist project. Indeed, I think of the abstract ideas that I sought to bring to the fore in my collection of footage and subsequent montage sequences – palimpsest, polycentrality, etc. – as essences. But this admission is more a function of retroactive reflection rather than deliberate artistic will. Moreover, the search for essences, even for an entity as internally pluralistic as a city, does not necessarily equate to the kind of typological thinking, wherein an “entire class of objects share invariant, unchanging properties that distinguish them from other classes” (Richner et al, n.d.).

Perhaps the word ‘totalizing’, rather than ‘essentialist’, offers a more accurate way of critiquing the overriding tendency in my videos towards the ascendancy of a shared urban identity and erasure of conflicts that may arise within that identity. But whatever the term, I was directly engaged in a project that prioritized the coherence of the urban scale over its inconsistencies (even though that coherence is comprised of dissimilar fragments, juxtaposed). And in the case of Istanbul, my particular sensitivity to the city’s beauty further complicated the issue.



Representational concerns aside, as I've already made clear, to try to avoid or recast this beauty seemed counter-productive. Such a choice would be as arbitrary as eschewing polycentrality as a theme in Mexico City out of fear of marginalizing those who have limited access to nodal centers. So, allowing beauty to remain a major criterion in the shot selection was a *fait accompli*.



But I still had to come up with an ordinal system of sequencing. In most of the other city-videos, a loose day-to-night structure – reminiscent of the progressions in most city-symphonies – seemed an appropriate organizing principle. For Istanbul, somehow, a mere chronology seemed insufficient. I wanted to find a way to thematize the totalizing impulse that my representational concerns had raised. Thus, I chose to organize the sequence spatially, as opposed to temporally.



The idea of choosing a particular linear organizing principle makes sense if the film or video in question is to be experienced linearly, that is, from beginning to end in a single sitting. The Biennale videos would not be seen in this way. The exhibition architects were adamantly against providing seating (to my chagrin), and I was determined to prevent viewers feeling they had missed the beginning of the piece and wondering if it was worth it to stick around for the next iteration. This problem is endemic to screening video art in an exhibition context. To avoid this problem, I was resolute about not providing any information that indicated a beginning or end; the video loop was to be seamless. The juxtaposition of the “last” shot to the “first” had to be as evocative as the juxtaposition of any other adjacent two shots.



CITY-VIDEO STILLS, ISTANBUL: **SEQUENCE** The periphery-to-center sequence recommends a spatial montage, where the images map a journey progressively, referencing various modes of transit on the way from Edirnekapi to Beyazit to a café on the banks of the Bosphorus.



In such a context, what is the point of spending time debating sequential organizing principles? As in the case of Mexico City, I found that the simple process of keeping a particular set of concerns in my head facilitated an authorial intentionality, even if it will never come across to the viewer. It will read as a choice. And I wanted this choice to reflect the spatial expanse of the city, the territorial boundedness that a journey suggests and the internal diversity that confounds that boundedness.

On a more concrete level, the journey motif allowed me to reference the vast variety of transport modes available in the city. The video ‘begins’ with a typical middle class corner of old Istanbul (in Balat, the former Jewish and Armenian Quarter). In reality, we are quite close to the center of Istanbul, in the part of the ancient city once bounded by the walls of Byzantium and Constantinople. Along with its neighbor Fener, the historically Greek quarter of town, Balat is currently experiencing intense pressure on its real estate market from an expanding creative class. But, in this shot, the level of urbanization is difficult to determine. A bored shopkeeper hangs in the doorframe of his shop. A vendor parks his pushcart outside the shop. Beyond it, the road bends sharply downwards. A couple pedestrians follow the road down the steep hill. The neighborhood seems tranquil, quiet and picturesque. And then a commuter train irrupts the residential reverie. No matter how many times I see this shot, I am always so entranced by the subtle movements and relationships in the foreground that I forget to notice the train tracks, and I am always a little surprised by the train (see [excerpt 8](#)).

CITY-VIDEO STILLS, ISTANBUL: **SEQUENCE** Determining an organizing principle to guide the montage does not preclude editing sequences of a particular action or event. Not all adjacent shots need be dissimilar. Informed juxtaposition can describe small moments, like this boy (right) doing cartwheels at the end of a day of Ramadan fasting, as well as it can describe the spatial expanse of a city or an interpretation of a given city’s sense of place.

From here, the journey has begun. A Turkish cameraman had sent me a sequence from within the driver's cab of a trolley. We follow, as viewers of the finished sequence, the driver's eye view as he leads us further into the city. Somehow, I thought that the journey motif would call attention to the boundedness of the city. I thought this spatial integrity would justify my claim of an aesthetic integrity.

As in all the cities that I rendered in video, the basic assumption was that there was one thing out there in the world that I was attempting to represent in each case, a city with a name and a populace and a physical place in the world. We may not agree on where each city begins or ends, who lives in it and who has a right to it, how it should be governed, or even what it looks like. But for all the millions of Istanbuls that exist each day in new ways for new people, a single Istanbul remains a common referent. Examining the essential nature of a place does not always mean reifying one hegemonic interpretation of a spatial identity that excludes some and oppresses others.

Cities are not monolithic, and their internal diversity is what makes them worthy of inquiry in the first place. The juxtaposition of momentary impressions, close-ups of individual actions, builds slowly into an image of the city that is simultaneously fragmentary and cohesive. Once the editing process was complete, I was able to reflect on the impressions and data that had given me an idea about each city, the over-arching abstractions that guided my collecting, shooting and editing process, and the sum total of the specific shots that comprise each video. The curatorial summary of each video that I developed for the catalogue offers a brief, but illuminating, summary of this reflection (see image VII.4). Perhaps the descriptions ascribe too much intentionality to choices that were instinctive or reactionary or purely practical. But, like the cities that the videos intend to describe, each will mean something different to each viewer, so what follows is only one interpretation:

Bogotá:

Bogotá's pioneering approach to public transportation and public, open space shapes citizens' experience of a modernizing city and an inclusive society. This video is a journey through urban change and continuity in Bogotá, from barrios such as Pablo VI and Modelo Norte to the grand spaces of the colonial downtown.

Mexico City:

The sheer size of Mexico City is difficult to fathom. From a human scale, the city may be experienced as a series of different nodes of activity. Informal markets grow organically into circuits of infrastructure; barrios abut new commercial developments. The Mexico City video collage explores these zones of encounter through archival film and contemporary video footage. The neighborhoods observed include Neza, Polanco, the Centro Histórico, La Condesa, La Merced, Chalco, Santa Fe and Coyoacan.

Los Angeles:

For many Angelenos, the most recurring sensory experience of the city is the vista through a moving car window. Los Angeles' expansive freeway infrastructure, however, belies a nuanced set of relationships between the citizen and the landscape. This video takes the driver's-eye-view as its point of departure to explore the human interface with the street, the sidewalk, the river, and the beach.

New York City:

Both geographically and socially, New York City is an archipelago, defined by its relationship to water, by insularities and interdependencies. The video collage interweaves sketches of singular places with glimpses of ferries, bridges, tunnels and trains in motion. Through this dense network of infrastructural circuits, the city of neighborhoods somehow manages to cohere into a dynamic, plural metropolis.

Johannesburg:

Artist and urban geographer Ismail Farouk has developed a unique method of representing his city. Using his extensive research experience with Johannesburg's urban poor and a wide range of digital photographs, video and archival film, his intricate and kinetic flash animations illuminate the urban rhythms of Johannesburg singularly.

Cairo:

The rooftops of Cairo provide a powerful insight into a unique urban condition, where an ancient yet continuously expanding built environment that accommodates uses and re-uses. The Cairo video collage maps some of the city's different urban typologies and the opportunities they provide for innovation in urban living.

Istanbul:

Istanbul's urban landscape is a palimpsest. In an attempt to probe some of the city's layers, the video collage is organized as a journey from the periphery to the center, where the simple act of crossing the Bosphorus encompasses everything from the quotidian realities of commuting to the urban pressures of de-industrialization and the incomparable quality of light in this vibrant city.

London:

Perhaps London articulates the post-national condition of 21st century urbanism more overtly than almost anywhere else. One way to illuminate the city's baffling complexity is to explore the proximity of distinct housing typologies, the symbiotic relationship of informal markets to global financial centers, and the adjacency of iconic architecture of the 17th century to that of the 20th. The London video collage plays on these juxtapositions while exposing the importance of the elements that bind the city together. The public transit network, the parks, and the Thames bring coherence to the urban scale.

Berlin:

This video collage takes the abundance of space in Berlin —the richness in emptiness—as its central theme. A swift visual journey through the disparate neighborhoods of Marzahn, Neukölln, Charlottenburg and Kreuzberg reveals a city that creatively adapts abandoned spaces and a public life that reflects the character of an increasingly diverse city of immigrants.

Mumbai:

Mumbai's overwhelming density does not allow for any space to be wasted, on trains, under bridges, between buildings. The images in this video collage focus on the innovative spatial practices that emerge from this extreme urban condition and continuously reorganize human coexistence.

Tokyo:

The Tokyo video collage is a meditation on motion, on how people negotiate their paths through one of the largest urban agglomerations on Earth, on how traveling between points in a city is, in itself, a vital experience of the urban.

Shanghai:

Within a small area of central Shanghai on both banks of the Huangpu, global aspirations of financial influence confront local survival strategies. This video collage examines Shanghai's image of itself in light of its rapid urban development. Recurring visual allusions to the city's past counterpose brave new visions of its future.

UPON REFLECTION: INSTALLATION

I left London for Venice in the second week of August with sixteen completed videos. I had directly produced eleven and curated or co-produced five others. With the DVDs in hand, I showed up in Venice ready to participate in the installation. I was instructed to liaise with the design and construction about the projectors and speakers for the video project, and to represent the curatorial team in other crucial installation matters as well such as lighting and photographic hanging.

The installation was anything but smooth. It was one of the more emotionally wrenching experiences of my short artistic life. Nothing was built to specifications. Items of vital importance were cut from the budget without notice or discussion. Different work crews reported to different bosses without communication or coordination. And worst of all, I don't speak Italian. The fact that I had worked so closely with Ricky's team in London paid off, however, as I knew the exhibition content well enough to spot the most egregious errors.



Installing the show
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi



Installing the show
Photo: Gian Luca Poggi

But no matter how many times I had gone over the plan in countless conference calls with the designers in Milan and the project managers in Venice, many effects of the design and the content were impossible to predict. I was particularly struck by the fact that the exhibition could work at many different paces. If a viewer walked straight down the Corderie, certain bold-type facts and images and sounds would jump out at her, and she would probably come away with a vague impression of the rapidity of urban change in the world today. Another viewer might spend hours poring over the detailed descriptions of each city, absorbing the demographic data and watching the full five-to-seven minutes of each video. Both would have an informative and, hopefully, enjoyable experience, and neither is less valid.

Walking down the hall once the show was open to the public, all I could think of is all the things I wished I'd done differently. All of a sudden, the London video seemed like a glorified tourism advertisement. Tokyo seemed like a music video. Mercifully, my disappointment with the technical imperfections (there was never a day when all sixteen videos were all working at the same time) overshadowed my artistic regret. And I was genuinely proud of how much the whole exhibition felt of a piece, that none of the

exhibition's failings resulted from our ignorance or avoidance of a certain issue, but rather from our deliberations.

I think probably the best measure of our success is that no one has been indifferent about the show. Critics either heaped praise or tore it to shreds. The New York Times and The Guardian were very critical, asking "where's the architecture?" The Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal and The International Herald Tribune raved, lauding architecture's final reckoning with its social responsibility (see appendix). I agreed with much of the criticism that focused on the show's superficiality. (Though defensively I wanted to protest that the broad strokes with which we painted global urbanism were a choice.) I disagreed with those critics who posited that the Biennale's temporary shift away from buildings heralded the end of architecture. As for the videos, the polarity of opinion was similar. One viewer asked me, politely, why all the cities looked so similar. Another commented that the videos were the only part of the exhibition that undermined the graphic designers' tendency to make all the cities look equivalent. In the end, the tension between similarity and uniqueness cuts to the heart of comparative work. Does demonstrating that Mumbai and Los Angeles share certain demographic pressures and

infrastructural challenges foster a collaborative space of transformative possibility? Or does it erase the singularities that enable informed action? No one can say if this year's Biennale inspired any action. Like most exhibitions, it is more reflective of existing trends towards urbanism within the architectural community than it is a shaper of future trends.

The point of the city-videos was not merely to provide a backdrop for the other data presented. It was also to assert, boldly, that interventions that deny either the specificities or the commonalities of place will fail. At the same time, determining a sense of place should not blindly resist attempts at defining an essential character, even though that character will never amount to a representative cross-section. As with human beings, all identities are partial. A sense of place – one that attests to the inextricability of the physical form and the social life of cities – is not a dossier of architectural details and public practices. It is an essence that brings coherence to the urban scale even as it ramifies infinitely through the pluralities of human experience. And it emerges from the singularity of human action and the multiplicity of spatial rhythms, from the parts that speak for the whole.

IX CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR URBAN PLANNING AND DESIGN

My approach to this discussion reveals my deep bias that makers of images benefit immeasurably from studying the history of image-making, as much as urban planners should study the many ways cities have been planned – and what cities have *meant* – in the past. The exponential increase in access to the technologies that produce moving images has, in the most positive sense of the term, democratized the medium. But the proliferation of moving images enabled by technological advancements has also allowed a peculiar resurgence of the naïve belief in and unquenchable thirst for the ‘reality’ (as in reality television) of the movie captured on a cheap video camera or cell-phone. While the academy fully comprehends the social construction of reality, as well as the role images play in mediating that reality, this understanding has not given rise to sophisticated attempts to activate the subjective gaze of the image-maker and to elevate it to the level of interpretation. Furthermore, increased

opportunities for amateur production privilege the shooting of video as ascendant in urban image-making. For this reason, my analysis has focused on editing, on the selection and juxtaposition of captured images as the fundamental interpretive act that determines a cinematic product’s meaning.

With the power of editing in mind, I relish the way city symphonies like *Berlin* or *Man with a Movie Camera* arrange socio-spatial fragments into a montage that prioritizes essences in order to bring coherence to the urban scale. But I see the limitations of this approach: its aesthetic priorities leave little room for social criticism; it privileges the spatial over the social. I am impressed by the epic approach evident in a regional planning documentary like *The River* or *The City*, in which montage is imbued with social content in order to argue for a specific planning intervention. But I resist the top-down and deductive treatment of images as

merely illustrative of a preconceived, expository argument about the spatial or social dynamics in question. I draw inspiration from the way cinema verité allows uncontrolled experience to unfold without recourse to text or voiceover, discovering ‘the real’ in images rather than predetermining it and illustrating it subsequently. But its noble resistance to essentializing its subject matter privileges social relations over spatial form. And I am deeply impressed by William Whyte’s conviction for learning through looking. But I wish his insistence on the determinism of physical details as constitutive of ‘quality of life’ did not reduce urban complexity to facile prescriptions of form.

Each of the films I have discussed was produced for a different purpose, and none of the makers considered himself primarily an urban planner. At most, as with Mumford or Whyte, the maker was reacting against a prevailing current of urban thought. More often, as with Ruttman or Rouch, aesthetic, meta-cinematic and social concerns guided the creative process. The agenda of my own work, while attempting to construct a positive affirmation of each city’s singularity, did so in order to force a particular subset of the architectural community to broaden its definition of

context. Perhaps this agenda might be considered ‘plannerly.’ But it is more discourse than action. The intention was to provoke greater awareness that the abstract essences of city life are a vital component of a city’s context. Physical details like urban grain, open space and scale height and massing contribute to a site’s context. And social details like demographic profiles and economic activity contribute to a site’s context. But a powerful aspect of context cannot be described in these terms, or in words at all, and therefore requires a sensory language if it is to be expressed. The profession of urban planning aims to incorporate both physical and social context into its interventions, but lacks a unified mode of expression appropriate to both. As for the third category, the profession remains resigned to a kind of acknowledged and dissatisfied avoidance. To be sure, the word ‘meaning’ in terms of socio-spatial urban dynamics is bafflingly complex and problematic. But the complexity does not forgive the absence of sophisticated attempts to try to tease it out, represent it, and incorporate into informed action.

In the preceding chapters, I have distinguished two strategies, among many, that classify past attempts to argue cinematically for

a particular response to our urban environment: the evocative and the evidentiary. Each of the films discussed has employed one or both of these strategies to greater or lesser degrees. The former privileges the filmic device of montage while the latter attempts more transparent modes of spatial description. The evocative approach is most effective in rendering a sense of place. The evidentiary approach is most effective in evincing the use of space. Contemporary urban discourse holds local meaning and spatial practices to be mutually constitutive (see Thrift and Amin 2002). Why then, must the medium most suited to representing the dynamic qualities of both realms treat them separately? Part of the answer raises the difficult questions of audience and intention.

The evidentiary, with its social-scientific bent, lends itself to intra-professional uses for representation and analysis, from environment-behavior research to design process narratives. In other words, in its assumed ability to provide social-scientific data along the lines of focused interviews or participant-observation, it supports the proposal of micro-surgical urban planning interventions, such as comfortable street-furniture or plazas of a

certain size. The evocative, with its preference for narrative and illustration, lends itself to extra-professional attempts to garner public support for macro-scale projects, such as marketing videos to lure investors or to bid for an international event like the Olympics. Narrative uses will always be primary in a movie-going public's conception of cinema. Even within documentary practice, the emphasis is usually on telling a good story. Therefore, evocative techniques are often employed to support a scripted storyline. Moving images illustrate the city rather than explore it. To differentiate itself, the evidentiary film project avoids narrative techniques associated with the evocative tradition, such as montage, in order to add credence – the semblance of objectivity – to its argument. In a planning tradition, evidentiary film-based arguments tend towards prescriptions of form; they are the cinematic extension of traffic and pedestrian counts. In so doing, the evidentiary film does not capitalize on film's intrinsic ability to convey urban complexity. The next step for the planner-filmmaker is to recuperate the evocative tradition while maintaining the investigative aspect of the evidentiary tradition. In order to interrogate the nuances of socio-spatial dynamics, the planner-filmmaker must learn through

looking and then make bold but open-ended interpretive statements through her use of montage.

A partial precedent for this proposition comes from the rarefied world of global architecture, in the architectural representations of Zaha Hadid. As a visual medium, moving image-based representations – and visual imagery generally – are more readily incorporated into architectural practice than they are into planning practice. So, while static visual tools are an architectural legacy, architects are no more satisfied with the range of representational tools at their disposal than urbanists. Hadid's practice is committed to infusing architectural representation with some of the keywords I have identified as intrinsic to cinema – motion, fragment, montage, etc. As aesthetic objects, her renderings refer to the constructivist and suprematist montages of Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin (see image II.2; page 18). But as interpretations of experience intended to convey a building's relationship to its urban context, her renderings call to mind the mobile, multiple perspectives through which we encounter built forms in daily life. As such, the language of her drawing is cinematic:

Zaha Hadid is a great cinematographer. She sees like a camera. She perceives the city in slow motion, in pans, swoops and close-ups, in jump-cuts and narrative rhythms. As she draws the world around her, she draws out its unconscious spaces. She finds what is latent in the constructions of our modern world and storyboards them into utopias. She boldly explores, she slows down and accelerates the rhythms of everyday life, and she subjects her environment to the surgical exposition of architecture as a form of representation. She builds the explosion of a tenth of a second (Betsky 1998:6).

While this critic describes the cinematic quality of Hadid's work in the language of cinematography, her ability to collapse the distinct experiential velocities of three-dimensional space into a two-dimensional drawing is more precisely an exercise in montage. The appropriate metaphor is not shooting film, but editing film. The reference to the 'explosion of a tenth of a second' is an overt allusion to Walter Benjamin, who understood better than anyone else the semantic potential of juxtaposition. He writes, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, *it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action*. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets,

our offices and furnished rooms, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling (Benjamin 1968:238).

As we have seen, Benjamin finds in the simultaneous display (rather than linear description) of dissimilar fragments great allegorical potential to interpret the complex condition of modernity. For Hadid, the potential in the assembly of distinct perspectives into a unitary plane is to convey the complexity of spatial experience. The fact that both approaches to the combination of discrete visual images suggest the montage metaphor attests to the technique's suitability to urban subject matter. But can the metaphor be extended beyond its architectural and historiographic applications to encompass the social interactions of street life?

Both Hadid and Benjamin choose montage for its ability to convey complexity and simultaneity; existing tools available to them are insufficient. Urban form and experience manifest what Jane Jacobs calls "organized complexity" (1961:440). Perhaps her

mode of 'seeing' this complexity contains clues for the application of filmmaking to urban thought and action.

We don't have to wonder what kind of filmmaker Jane Jacobs would have been; her writing suggests a certain cinematic method. She is an observer of city life, collapsing in one moment the distances between Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, the North End of Boston and Brooklyn Heights and dwelling in another moment on an extended montage of urban actions in Greenwich Village. She does not look at details systematically, but advises her readers to "to think about processes" and "to think inductively, reasoning from particulars to the general, rather than the reverse" (1961:440). The genius of her prose emerges from her confidence that her aesthetic arrangement of details provides a sound basis for her broad propositions of mixed-use, short blocks and aged buildings. Her representation of existing places grounds her vision for change.

In discussing the intricate relationship of design-oriented representation of places to urban experience, Peter Bosselmann writes,

Although the people who live in cities experience urban places firsthand, design professionals explain these places conceptually. Charts show statistics, diagrams show flow or movement, and maps indicate structure and layout. Most professional representations are like theory in that they reduce reality into easily and clearly communicable facts or measurements. But the facts remain abstract. Professionals understand conceptual representations – or claim to – but few people outside the professions can read the information, let alone understand what it would be like to walk through streets or neighborhoods described in such representations (Bosselmann 1998:xiii).

The lack of an experiential, sensory language for urban form and life limits the communicative capacity of planning and design, and thereby limits their effectiveness. Urban walking provides a potent symbol for this limitation, because walking a neighborhood's streets provokes the most palpable confrontation with fragments of that neighborhood's essential qualities. Walking in the city is, according to Michel de Certeau, a spatial practice whose capacity to generate meaning opposes the “‘geometrical’ or ‘geographical’ space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions” (1988:93). But the representational world of filmic montage can activate the tension between a space of practices and a space of optical integrity. Put simply, a filmmaker can juxtapose a totalizing aerial shot (such as the view from the

World Trade Center that begins de Certeau's essay) with a street scene at ground level. Both views are real and useful for the urban planner and the urban citizen. And putting the two together might produce Eisenstein's *tertium quid* and thereby uncover something special about the place in question.

I began this inquiry with an epigraph quoted from Kevin Lynch, the urbanist who makes, in *The Image of the City*, the strongest case for the primacy of the city's image within its experiential world. Yet he also reminds us, in *What Time is This Place?*, that despite the potency of a cohesive mental map, “A unified language appropriate to the sensory form [of cities] will be a long time developing, if indeed a unified language is possible” (1976:58). Cinema may have the capacity to add to the development of such a language, but before we can make such an assertion, we must ask: why is such a language desirable? Part of the answer can be found in Lynch's definition of site planning: “Any plan, however radical, maintains some continuity with the preexisting locale. Understanding a locality demands time and effort. The skilled site planner suffers a constant anxiety about the ‘spirit of place’”

(Lynch and Hack 1984:5). For me, a sensory language is desirable inasmuch as it addresses this anxiety.

The essences that cumulatively constitute this spirit of place are ineffable. But even if we can't verbalize the essential nature of, say, lower Manhattan, we can collect a set of partial representations of those details that call it to mind. No moving image is the proverbial grain of sand in which we can see the world. But the informed juxtaposition of multiple fragments can attest to an urban site's Gestalt.

One of the reasons the spirit of place causes planners anxiety is not merely because it is irreducible – more than the sum of its parts – but because it means different things to different people. If “the sensed quality of a place is an interaction between its form and its perceiver” (Lynch and Hack 1984:153) then urban planning must advance strategies to operationalize urban perception in ways that value the subjectivity of individual perception without reifying singular and reductive descriptions of essence. The sensory language capable of conjuring a spirit of place must be open-ended enough to allow multiple readings and

definite enough to contribute productively to socio-spatial understanding. In other words, the perceiver must learn through looking and, subsequently, deliberately identify what she finds special – worth preserving, enhancing or changing – about the site in question. Mining the archive of non-fiction film about cities – the surface of which I have barely scratched – provides a preliminary intellectual and formal arsenal of strategies for how she might begin such a project.

In the introduction to this essay, I state that the potential of cinema to inform urban planning action is interpretive. That is, filmmaking in an urban planning context can assign meaning to certain aspects of the relationship between social relations and city form. While the majority of my discussion has been historical, I have approached the research question from the point of view of a maker of films and video. In other words, I feel strongly that a maker (be she artist, author, analyst, scholar, designer or planner) actively assigns meaning to urban experience through her representational choices of selection and juxtaposition. In a world saturated with images, such choices are not to be taken lightly, for as Peter Bosselmann reminds us, for

city planners and designers, “the process of representation is a complex form of reasoning. What they choose to represent influences their view of reality and very significantly defines the outcome of designs and plans, and thus the future form of cities” (1998:xiii).

The representations whose history Bosselmann traces in the first part of his book, *Representation of Places*, include images outside of reality, images of what designers imagine or propose. Digital animation, he acknowledges, offers a kinetic version of these invented scenarios of potential future form. I have deliberately avoided discussing this kind of moving imagery, because, for me, the power of planning cinema is to interpret existing conditions. Filmmaking is a uniquely suited and underutilized tool to explore context. Maximizing filmmaking’s effect within urban planning action means using it as an exercise in site analysis.

Of course, filmmaking can incorporate the traditional analytical tools of spatial investigation: maps, photographic documentation, prose description (through the written word, voiceover narration or dramatic re-enactment), sections, plans, elevations, land use

diagrams, charts of economic activity, or demographic profiles. And it can arrange these elements into a single, coherent text whose constituent scenes can include change over time or direct comparisons to other places far removed from the site in question. As such, it begins as an intra-professional tool during the initial phase of any physical planning process. But it can also add something new to this mix. It can render nuances that cannot be expressed in photographs, words, charts or diagrams. It can interpret a site’s essential qualities, and then open up that interpretation to a wide variety of actors: other designers and planners, or members of the community ‘affected’ by the planning process, or distant and curious observers. I am not suggesting that all urban planners and designers should reach for their video cameras and create montages of the sites they are about to plan. But their toolkit can certainly be expanded to include analytical strategies that treat the abstract elements of place and creative strategies for representations to which untrained eyes can respond productively. Filmmaking can do both, holistically.

The site analysis film could begin with the ‘windshield survey’, taking stock of the site’s topography, the natural and built features native to it. The panoramic long shot is an obvious cinematic analogue for the windshield survey. But, the sequence of impressions that constitute the sensed quality of a place can also be expressed in a successive arrangement of discrete visual details. As analysis deepens, layering information gathered from repeated visits to the site over a period of time, the site analysis film allows its viewer visually and mentally to isolate these layers of information – infrastructure, easements, roads, traffic flow – without detaching them from their surrounding context and interdependencies. Panoptic and fragmentary views can be juxtaposed into a single coherent text.

The kind of film I have in mind is a self-contained product that can ‘speak’ for itself when necessary, or it can form part of a more intricate presentation alongside traditional artifacts of the urban planning process. It can travel and inform. By travel, I mean a film that represents a particular neighborhood can be presented in the external milieu of a city planning office several miles away or in a foreign country.

We must remember, however, that we cannot present a pure facsimile of a place to bring into our design studios or community meetings. And therefore we will always encounter translation problems among multiple independent actors each operating with his own biases and priorities. Again, “the sensed quality of a place is an interaction between its form and its perceiver” (Lynch and Hack 1984:153). Therefore, we must create a document that identifies salient qualities – be they constraints or opportunities – in a way that is open-ended. In the same way, the film can help to define a problem that the site planner seeks to address with his design. Visual hierarchies exist within any montage, and manipulating syntactical relationships between images is one way to articulate a priority area for action. Such a document can function as a common departure point for planners and designers, a representation of the ‘spirit of place’ with which the intervention must contend and/or a bold statement of the problem to be solved. Such a document can also invite response from stakeholders external to the design/planning process. What recommends the use of film for this kind of process-oriented abstraction is the medium’s accessibility to a wide public.

Part of cinema's inherent accessibility and ability to entertain relies on the passivity of the medium's reception. But the open-ended principle requires that the planning film discourage neutral spectatorship. A film about a place can assign meaning to the relationship between its physical form and its social relations, but the maker of the film should not have a monopoly on interpretation. Rather, his selection and arrangement of diverse images should, first, reflect his informed analysis and understanding of the details within a site that speak to its essential qualities and, second, elicit the viewers' own interpretations. The viewer, in this scenario, is a stakeholder in the proposed intervention. I am not suggesting that films should be enlisted to dumb down the design or planning process to make it comprehensible to the public. Maintaining distinct sets of visual tools for process and presentation is obviously necessary for technical practice. But creating an audio-visual common ground can foster productive conversation about the costs and benefits of any proposed course of action.

The reason I have sought to create links between the fields of non-fiction cinema and urban planning grows from a naïve and

profound question that I have been asking as long as I can remember: why does the environment look and feel the way that it does? Filmmaking is no better suited to provide the facts that might answer that question than other forms of written or visual communication. However, the discovery of the world through filmmaking, the selection and juxtaposition of visual parts that speak for the whole, can produce an abstraction of actual conditions that powerfully produces what Susan Buck-Morss names as Benjamin's belief in montage: "the coherence of vision necessary for philosophical reflection." It can also, according to Benjamin, "assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action" (1968:238).

To cull and synthesize the beneficial aspects of planning filmmaking from the history of non-fiction cinema's engagement with urbanism requires the creative juxtaposition of moving images that depict uncontrolled urban actions. What is sacrificed in such a proposition is the instrumental didacticism of the scripted montage, on the one hand, and the data value of describing just one site at a time within its territorial limits, on the other. What is gained is the ability to tease out abstract essences

that grow from observed experience of social interactions within the context of the built environment. Suggesting an identified meaning within a particular city or neighborhood does not have to be reductive. On the contrary, it can expand the sense of transformative possibility for that city or neighborhood.

Collecting physical and social details of our cities on film does not preclude constructing an experiential world whose coherence is abstract and essential, worthy of philosophical reflection and informed intervention. Representations are, after all, always partial.

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