



## For a Better America: The New Deal on Film

### PROGRAM ONE: THE LAND AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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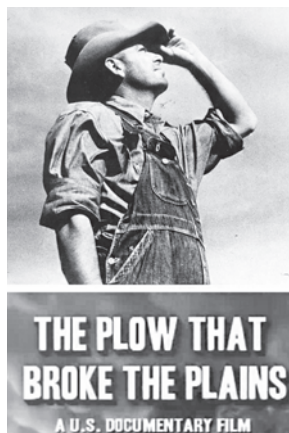
### PROGRAM THREE: THE PROJECTS

1. "Work Pays America" 1936
2. "The City" 1939
3. "Valley of the Tennessee" 1940
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#### ■ *The Plow that Broke the Plains*

1936, 29 min. Directed and written by Pare Lorentz. Music: Virgil Thomson. Narrator: Thomas Chalmers. Producer: Resettlement Administration

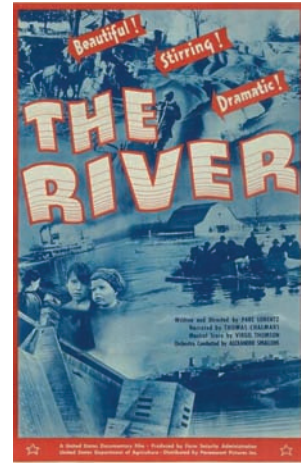
This classic film about the Dust Bowl has been one of the most widely praised and studied documentaries to be produced in America. Its masterful use of music and edited images were to influence a generation of filmmakers.



#### ■ *The River*

1937, 32 min. Directed and written by Pare Lorentz. Music: Virgil Thomson. Narrator: Thomas Chalmers. Producer: Farm Security Administration

Pare Lorentz' monumental documentary about the exploitation and misuse of one of our greatest natural resources, the Mississippi River. The Farm Security Administration gave Lorentz a more substantial budget for *The River*, which was conceived as a tour of the Mississippi that would begin in the northern tributaries and end at the Gulf of Mexico. Lorentz began shooting in the fall of 1936, with two crews that eventually converged and traveled downriver to New Orleans. But in January 1937, after the initial shoot, flooding devastated the river valley, and Lorentz called his cameramen back to document the real-life drama. Working long hours, they traveled back up the Mississippi and the Ohio to record the efforts of WPA relief workers, and the footage provided an electrifying climax to the film. Again Lorentz shapes the story as a conservationist parable, showing how rapacious timber and cotton industries wore down the land, and a late sequence records the grim lives of tenant farmers and sharecroppers in the south, the voice-over narrator explaining that "poor land makes poor people." *The River* was so highly acclaimed that Lorentz finally got a commercial distributor, Paramount Pictures, and it was named best short documentary at the Venice film festival, beating out Leni Riefenstahl's Olympiad



#### ■ *Power and the Land*

1940, 39 min. Directed by Joris Ivens. Producer: Rural Electrification Administration for the United States Film Service

*Power and the Land* was intended to encourage farmers to form their own electrical cooperatives with the help of the Rural Electrification Administration. However, famed Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens has transcended this original purpose by providing us with a timeless portrait of American farm life, rich in pastoral beauty. The American poet Stephen Vincent Benet wrote the narration.

#### ■ *The Land*

1942, 45 min. Directed, written and narrated by Robert Flaherty. Producer: United States Film Service, completed by the Agricultural Adjustment Administration

When Robert Flaherty was invited to direct a film for the U.S. Film Service, it was to be one of the rare instances when "The Father of Documentary Film" would have an opportunity to focus his camera on his own country. Unlike his previous films, such as *Nanook of the North* and *Man of Aran*, he would be dealing with contemporary problems and themes. *The Land* took Mr. Flaherty to almost every part of America during the summer of 1939, and he was appalled by the poverty he saw among migrant workers living in a land of abundance.

#### ■ *The Road is Open Again*

1933, 5 min. Producer: Warner Brothers Studio for the National Recovery Administration (NRA)

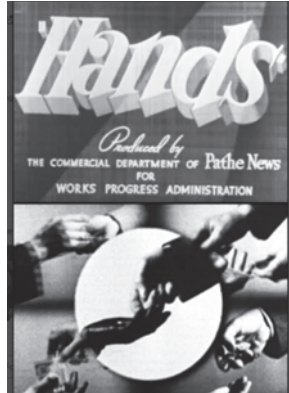
This musical short subject features singer Dick Powell being

inspired to write a patriotic song by the ghosts of Presidents Washington, Lincoln, and Wilson.

#### ■ **Hands**

1934, silent, 5 min. Directed and photographed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Produced by Pathe for the Works Progress Administration.

This silent short subject features a montage of hands; idle hands, hands at work, and finally, hands putting earnings from WPA relief projects back into circulation. *Hands* is generally considered to be the first Government film to convey a message artistically.



#### ■ **Dawn Strikes the Capitol Dome**

1936, 10 min. Producer: Works Progress Administration

This short film describing WPA projects is introduced as “an impressionistic study of “Washington, DC — the City Superb!”

#### ■ **We Work Again**

1937, 16 min. Producer: Works Progress Administration

This short film focuses on the employment of African-Americans in WPA projects. The film features rare footage of the Federal Theater Project’s all-black version of *Macbeth*.

#### ■ **The Fight for Life**

1940, 70 min. Directed and written by Pare Lorentz. Cast: Will Geer, Myron McCormick, and Storrs Haynes. Producer: United States Film Service

Pare Lorentz’ first film for the newly established U.S. Film Service uses professional actors to dramatize the real-life hazards of childbirth in the Chicago slums and the work of the Government-funded Chicago Maternity Ward. The film features an uncredited appearance by Woody Guthrie, and Women of the City of Chicago who received medical care from the Maternity Center. Filmed on location in Chicago.



Lorentz sent actors Myron McCormick, Storrs Haynes, and Will Geer (later Grandpa on *The Waltons*) to train for six weeks as clinicians at the Chicago Maternity Ward, an innovative program that provided low-cost home births (it was later the subject of Kartemquin Films’ *The Chicago Maternity Center Story*). Lorentz’s skill at writing voice-over narration doesn’t translate to dialogue, and “*The Fight for Life*” is dramatically inert, devoid of conflict or insight. But as in “*The River*” and “*The Plow That Broke the Plains*,” the locations are revelatory — in this case, block after block of west-side slums, with ragged children playing in junkyards and homeless people pawing through garbage for food. In a rave March 7, 1940 *New York Times* review, film critic Frank Nugent praised the film “on the borderline between documentary, “as we know it in the world and fiction film,” concluding his review

by saying “if there were some form of Pulitzer award for the kind of cinema journalism Mr. Lorentz has been doing,” then Lorenz deserves the Pulitzer.

#### ■ **Work Pays America**

1936, 36 min, Producer: Works Projects Administration

*Work Pays America* is an overview of WPA public works projects. Included are descriptions of construction projects, traffic control studies, medical and childcare, and the work of the Federal Arts projects.

#### ■ **The City**

1939, 33 min, Directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. Producer: American Institute of Planners. Music: Aaron Copland

Produced for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, *The City* is a call to rebuild America’s cities in the form of planned communities. Much of the film was shot locally in Greenbelt, MD. Studs Terkel, who later wrote an oral history of the Great Depression recalled in his introduction to *Hard Times: Williard Van Dyke’s 1940 documentary Valley Town* about Lancaster Pennsylvania, “a steel town gone dead,” was as vivid to him in 1986 as the images of laid off workers at Republic Steel, in South Chicago which resembled Valley Town. Van Dyke was both a photographer and filmmaker, and effectively used sound sparingly in the documentary, to let real, unemployed workers tell their stories on film.

#### ■ **Valley of the Tennessee**

1944, 30 min, Directed by Alexander Hammid. Producer: Office of War Information, Overseas Branch

This documentary, part of a series of films called *The American Scene*, traces the origins and construction of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and its effects on the people of the valley. The film includes a sequence showing Franklin Roosevelt speaking on the importance of the TVA for water control and hydroelectric power.

#### ■ **The Columbia**

1949, 30 min. Producer: Department of Energy, Bonneville Power Administration. Songs by Woody Guthrie

The Bonneville Power Administration was created in 1937 for the development of the Columbia River and tributaries in order to provide electricity to farms and small communities. In 1941, the BPA invited folksinger Woody Guthrie to Portland, OR to record songs for their promotional film, *The Columbia*. The result was some of Guthrie’s most famous compositions including *Roll On Columbia*, *Pastures of Plenty* and *Grand Coulee Dam*.