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**Social Documentary in the Era of the Popular Front: *The Plow That
Broke the Plains*, Alternative Filmmaking, and the Struggle for
Independent Distribution in the United States, 1935-37**

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Abstract

Social Documentary in the Era of the Popular Front: *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Alternative Filmmaking, and The Struggle for Independent Distribution in the United States, 1935-37

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In the time before World War II in the United States, a generation was radicalized by the Great Depression and inspired to challenge cultural conventions across many forms of media. In the area of film, a peculiar instance of alternative production and distribution sprouted out of the United States government in the form of a 2-reel documentary entitled *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, originally released in 1936. Funded by a relief agency, directed by a man with no experience, and shot by radical leftist artists out of New York City, the film was an unusual challenge to the status quo of the prevailing classical Hollywood model. It was so jarring, in fact, that Hollywood studios denounced the effort publicly and prevented the mainstream theatres that they controlled from showing the picture. The following efforts to distribute the film in spite of this mainstream opposition allowed the film to be seen by an alternative set of audiences across multiple kinds of exhibition spaces, including educational assemblies and striking labor unions. Using a plethora of primary and secondary historical sources,

as well as a framework developed by Chris Atton for studying alternative media, this thesis analyzes the production and distribution processes of the film to help elucidate how a work functioning outside of the dominant commercial industry could attain national recognition and reach audiences across urban, suburban, and rural areas of the country at a time when other such alternative cinematic endeavors never accessed many viewers outside of a bourgeois elite cultural sphere.

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Introduction

Pare Lorentz's 1936 25-minute documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is no stranger to historians and film scholars who study the era of the American Popular Front, but the contexts surrounding its inception, production, distribution, and exhibition are segregated in academic discussion by disciplines of film studies, documentary studies, and history. Its understanding, limited to its common descriptors such as "documentary film," and "government film," do little to elucidate its position as an intersection of a plethora of socio-political actors, organizations, and ideologies. It is therefore in need of an interdisciplinary historical examination that can discuss these intersections in tandem. Not *all* such avenues can be comprehensively addressed, but the rapidly developing world of media studies offers an excellent platform to illuminate a great deal of insight with even a few of these avenues.

The film and its director, Pare Lorentz, have always been a canonical factor in the scholarly discourse of American documentary history. Its most transparent contemporary legacy is as a staple text in college classes on film or documentary history. Its contributions to American cultural memory are more elusive in terms of the ability to rigidly measure them. For example, from the late 1930s onward it was constantly shown in middle and high school classrooms as an educational tool for history and social science, surely passing before the eyes of an unknowable quantity of members of a rising generation. Despite the inevitable vagueness seen through the fog of history, when understood in aggregate with the wealth of other cultural artifacts born of the Popular

Front at large, the film's historical placement becomes much more lucid as a work radical in production methods, aesthetics, distribution, and exhibition in its time. While the Great Depression wrought suffering on urban streets and desolate farms across the United States, commercial studios sought to provide fantastical yet morally pure escapes from such horrific realities with their mainstream cinematic fiction. Lorentz and his film were part of a scrappy, disorganized movement in the country that sought to challenge this paradigm and make films that could simultaneously challenge, inform, and still entertain the same audiences that enjoyed classical Hollywood fiction. Despite this movement's relative inability to fashion new audiences in droves, big studios still saw these alternative practices as a threat to their carefully-honed profits, and accordingly offered them no cultural legitimacy. A film, radical in both content and process of creation, was created within the context of a state cultural apparatus at the same time it came under very public fire from powerful commercial interests. The very notion that this was possible means that this history is relevant to a contemporary media atmosphere that regards such work with analogous hostility.

This thesis is the chronicle of a particular film's singular alternative historical environment, one that saw an unusual creative union between radical artists & a rigid capitalist state, and then an equally unique journey through varied networks of cultural interest when it was released in 1936. It was the earliest example of a product of a new kind of government film 'industry,' one largely involving the leadership of filmmaker Pare Lorentz, that continually made documentary experiments for several years until finding itself left outside looking in by a new wartime government. The film was viewed

upon with considerable curiosity, and on occasion, disgust, by Americans of many regional and ideological backgrounds. Its struggle for distribution was the result of thorough rejection by a mainstream commercial cultural apparatus, but that confrontation ultimately resulted in its national impression as a romanticized media underdog. This was in spite of its sponsorship stemming from what critics would have no problem calling big government, an institution with more than enough power to propagate its own cultural ideas to the public for free. And yet, neither condition truly defined the socio-cultural environment that *The Plow That Broke the Plains* permeated in the interwar years, a climate rich and disorganized in excited artistic and social experimentation. A film like *Plow That Broke the Plains* is now no longer a contemporary plea for social conscience but simply a trace of the past. Contemporary viewers cannot identify with the immediacy of the film's message about a catastrophe from decades past, but they can certainly identify with the passion. The poet in me wants to say that to ask any more of its historical relevance is unnecessary, but the scholar in me knows that there is more to this artifact's origins to be understood.

The film's contemporary historical canonization in scholarship features extensive attention to textual analysis and oral history but lacks in areas of insight with regards to its institutional intricacies, from the director's struggles to navigate obstinate bureaucratic conventions inside a government agency, to the film's distribution in a hostile commercial environment. At a time when abject poverty pervaded urban and rural regions alike, the major commercial cinemas almost completely avoided any mention of such a social condition in its leisurely spaces. *Plow*, if not exactly direct or accusatory in

its portrayal of the Dust Bowl as a manmade environmental disaster, was certainly a challenge to this status quo, a critique of the prioritization of military and industrial interests over American soil and the people who inhabited it. Evaluating the context of the film's artistic contemporaries across media, such as the photography of the Farm Security Administration, which was produced out of the same information office as *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, and the literature of John Steinbeck among many others, can also help to provide a greater understanding of the attention of these efforts to moral interests, and such comparisons across forms of media are rare. The Popular Front social movement itself (for which, I will show, *Plow* remains as a cultural artifact) is confounding in its capacity to have socio-political impact without any official state representation or even institutional identification; this can, at least in part, be attributed to the truly diverse population of artists and creators from a variety of social backgrounds who could then communicate thoughtfully to an equally broad set of American audiences. Beyond this immediate context, *Plow* can also potentially be the crux of an enlightening case study of the much broader scope of alternative media, a lens for understanding media at large in need of such articulation.

This study asks: What nonstandard factors were instrumental to *The Plow that Broke the Plains*' success? In what fashion was this text a facilitator of future alternative practices, and in what ways was it a consequence of radical or alternative methods of film production and broader artistic expression? Was its critical and historical canonization due to its ties to hegemonic institutions such as the state, its radical influence, or a confluence of these roots? Was the government's support an aid or a hindrance to such a

film project? These questions are important because if more than a century of world cinema has made anything clear, it is that there is no reliable financial incentive for independent socially conscious filmmaking, especially when it comes to documentary, within a capitalist system where the majority of consumed media is produced and controlled by private commercial interests. In some instances this status quo has been defied, as was the case with the history of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, a film with enough critical and cultural ‘success’ that it garnered the unwanted attention and backlash of such private interests. The fact that it achieved even a minute level of socio-cultural impact in such a hostile climate means that the events and relations that led to its production and exhibition must be understood for the sake of a social documentary movement that faces the same kinds of struggles today.

This is a case study that will attempt to address these questions in a manner that can be divided into two broader approaches. The first chapter is an extensive contextualization that considers the radical and alternative aspects that contributed to the production and text of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* using categories of analysis from the discipline of alternative media. The second chapter will address *Plow*’s distribution and exhibition, both of which operated counter to any established standard of the era because such standards would not privilege its release. These means can serve to provide unprecedented insight into both the historical period and the Popular Front and New Deal social movements, but also for the broader context of radical and alternative media. This history is framed within a kind of tension, responsible for both restrictive and advantageous consequences, between institutional and alternative practices, that

assembles a tapestry of these complex relations in a more complete tandem than has previously been attempted.

Analysis of the production, distribution, and exhibition histories of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* demonstrates a few points. First, the negotiation between the state and Popular Front radical actors permitted an unconventional film to be produced with unprecedented levels of craft comparable in quality to the well-regarded cinema entertainment coming out of Hollywood at the same time. Second, the government's New Deal cultural apparatus allowed this film to be shown to greater and more diverse audiences than any other alternative cinema being produced, particularly documentary films made by radicals who felt that newsreel, the dominant nonfiction form in America for decades, was doing little to elucidate the truth of the injustices and suffering occurring in the era of the Great Depression. Third, cinema audiences beyond those found in mainstream commercial entertainment spaces in the 1930s were more complex and diverse than historical resources can truly inform us. However, by looking at this anomalous example of distribution and exhibition, a rapidly evolving socio-cultural valuation of film that was re-conceptualizing it as an artistic medium, an educational tool, and a valid platform of social conscience can be seen.

It may seem curious to isolate this film's history from those of its nonfiction contemporaries, such as subsequent government "films of merit" like *The River* (1937) or even less institutionally associated works such as Joris Ivens' *The Spanish Earth* (1937) or Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke's *The City* (1939), to name very few of many. The creation and release of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* is better understood in

isolation from these projects for this thesis. Most importantly, the dominant commercial cultural apparatus that shunned the notion of a well-produced government picture and refused to show the film in their theatres, a central premise of this history, would have markedly less hostility within a year, as demonstrated by Paramount's assent to take over distribution the office's second short documentary picture, *The River*. This specific tension that existed between the United States government, the dominant corporate industry of Hollywood, and the radical actors and organizations that belonged to neither hegemonic network was scarcely the same before these events occurred, and would definitely not be afterwards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The specific literature that directly addresses *The Plow that Broke the Plains* through the use of primary sources is, unsurprisingly, found mostly within the disciplines of film history and documentary studies. The majority of the film's contextualization involved a broader comparison of the film to motion picture studio history in America, to documentary history on an international level, and to its position as an example of the politics of Roosevelt's New Deal. Robert L. Snyder's *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* framed the production and distribution of the film around the life of Lorentz himself in a biographical fashion. Based on this perspective, the result is insightful though unavoidably adulatory of the subject. Richard Dyer MacCann addressed *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and other New Deal works from a broader perspective of state filmmaking in *The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures*. His arguments covered a much broader historical perspective from 1908 to

1945, plotting the long relationship between the state and the elusive concept of documentary that always found itself a topic of contentious debate among political actors. William Alexander very importantly placed the making of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* within the context of radical film work in *Film on the Left: American Documentary from 1931 to 1942*. As much as the film was a product of the Roosevelt administration (Lorentz being a staunch supporter of both its policy and ideology), its cinematographic contributions from the radically left artists of Nykino (Leo Hurwitz, Ralph Steiner, and seasoned straight photographer Paul Strand) are similarly crucial angles of origin for the text. Alexander properly identified this relationship, and resulting tension, as a textbook example of the kind of cultural and political bridging between disparate leftist actors in the American Popular Front.

These secondary sources all inevitably result in a narrative that designates Lorentz as an auteur. These books, and ultimately the ones that cite them, tend to apply a broader lens until they come to the juncture of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in a manner that halts to consider Lorentz very intimately, with chapter titles and subheadings devoted to emboldening his status as an essential person in the development of documentary film in a manner otherwise rarely implemented. Barnouw likely best punctuated this trend with his own introduction to the era, framing Lorentz's efforts as a "meteoric career—brief and brilliant."¹ This kind of statement serves to construct the history as a sort of romanticism of the rogue artist who combatted the firm neutrality of the prevailing

1. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 113.

Hollywood studio system as well as navigated the dense bureaucracy of government to fabricate what Lorentz himself would call ‘films of merit.’ This basis is far from unfounded or undeserved, but it does paint the history in a very particular heroic narrative that might hide more elusive truths.

At large, these histories are accountable to a certain privileging of the individuals who worked tirelessly to fight against various hegemonies and institutional structures that prevented their great vision of the relationship between art and audience from being realized, a notion doubtlessly promulgated by these individuals themselves. Lorentz’s memoirs (published in 1992) and the film reviews he wrote for various magazines and papers in the early 1930s imply this certain positioning of self against the tyrannical monstrosities of big business and institutionalized censorship. In short, because of the primary sources available to these scholars and the personal impressions of those involved in the events at hand, actors, and not the relations or processes between one another nor the organizations or ideologies to which they subscribe, are the well of information from which the arguments and assessments spring. The latter considerations are by no means ignored, but the structures of the arguments certainly privilege the emblazoned passion of these ‘great men’ as the central driving force of the narrative. This is hardly an instance of deception; there were, in fact, plenty of examples of hegemonic muscle-flexing against these individuals that played roles in shaping the direction of the production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, such as Hollywood’s blanket refusal to release archival footage to aid the production’s narrative. However, it remains important to note the foundations of this ‘outsider’ or ‘radical’ perspective, which include the

outsiders themselves.

This propensity can, in part, be attributed to the primary sources available. My intention is not to disparage this methodology but to illuminate the intricacies of the historiography of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in order to see how to rotate the paradigmatic lens and lend new depths to this journey for historical truth. Alexander, Snyder, and MacCann all relied on interviews with the involved parties, decades after they had occurred, to construct their arguments. MacCann, in attempting to understand production history through its political background, utilized office files of the Resettlement Administration, which later became the Farm Security Administration, now located in microfilm form at the Library of Congress. Snyder had access to Lorentz's collection of files when they were still in his possession; they are now located in the Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at Columbia University. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are the two newspapers cited most frequently for historical context and insight. As mentioned above, Lorentz's own memoirs, rather colloquial and jocular in tone, contain many examples that exhibit the kind of adversarial attitude that bleeds into the secondary works.

These works all also include efforts at textual analysis of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, though they proceed with a sort of underdeveloped formalism. This is not surprising given that a poetics of documentary film that functions on its own terms relative to poetics of fictional narrative film is a fairly new discipline, but the foundation is ready and waiting for elaboration. Renov's formative assessment of such poetics highlights the perennial struggle to understand the dichotomy (or lack thereof) between

‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ that films made partially from fact are forced to confront.² Paul Arthur takes this baton to argue that the text implies that films made through the New Deal were embodied as “approved *political* values as properties of filmic structure and iconography.”³ This claim only utilizes text and does not consider the documented ideological tension found in the relations between the film’s primary collaborators.⁴ Charles Keil attempts to operate on a typology of stasis versus mobility of action in the film. I do not want to stray too far in this direction, as these specific considerations of form, while helpful for the context of the progress of film styles, is a context that needs little additional insight, but Renov’s “four fundamental tendencies of documentary” are, in fact, a formalistic model relaxed enough that the content *can* be easily discussed alongside its socio-historical context.⁵ It cannot be ignored when addressing the text.

In all, this scholarship attests that the influence of the works of Pare Lorentz in their entirety are landmark texts in the formation of American documentary on par with the work of his predecessor and eventual contemporary Robert J. Flaherty. They take a kind of ‘overview’ approach to certain considerations, such as distribution, exhibition, technology, process, and others, that deserve more focus than they ultimately receive. This thesis will differ from these prior perspectives by seeking different methods of

2. Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 24.

3. Paul Arthur, “Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments),” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 110.

4. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 30.

5. Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, 21.

contextualization across a broader socio-cultural spectrum.

The key to this attempt involves an understanding of the recent (relative to the above works) literature concerning radical alternative media, which offers an opportunity to complicate the history of the production of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* as more than just a government undertaking. Constructing a model for understanding such a phenomenon is a challenge taken up by some communication scholars, and the consensus seems to be that while there are identifiable features, a meticulous articulation of context is required to properly understand a given case. Downing most broadly frames the issue of radical media around considerations of power and hegemony. Among many aspects to his definition of radical alternative media, he points out “two overriding purposes: (a) to express opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and against its behavior; (b) to build support, solidarity, and networking laterally against policies or even against the very survival of the power structure.”⁶ The power structure being opposed, to Downing, can consist of hegemonies of various kinds and identities, not merely what he sees as a historically binaristic consideration of such issues, a criticism of scholarship he even levies against his own previous work. In one useful exploration, he frames radical media along C.B. Macpherson’s concept of a developmental power agent, drawing out the idea that “the public’s ‘capacities’ to create viable societal arrangements are infinitely more capacious than cynics and elitists will

6. John D.H. Downing, Tamara V. Ford, Genève Gil, and Laura Stein, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communications and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks: Sage University Press, Inc., 2001), xi.

allow, but also that the public's ability to activate them is widely shackled."⁷ Along these lines, radical media can reshape the limits of mainstream hegemonic discourse, acknowledge the right to be heard of the underrepresented, attain liberation from censorship, and produce works less in a rigid hierarchy and more in a democratic power structure. In Downing's brief overview of instances of radical media in film and video, he mentions the radical left collectives Worker's Film and Photo League and Nykino (the latter of which played a significant role in *Plow's* creation) for about half a sentence.⁸ The point is that *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, as a text, is more than just alternative or radical media, but there are radical facets to its history that certainly justify its consideration along the lines just discussed. An alternative media model serves this history because the goals of major creators of the film, in particular Pare Lorentz, were very much in line with the purposes that Downing outlines, in defiance of the aims of the overarching state bureaucracy under which he was operating.

Chris Atton takes a comparable stab at defining alternative media, assigning a stable typology and then testing it in a case study of 'zine culture in the United Kingdom. Like Downing, he stresses an articulation of sociocultural context. In contrast to the kind of histories found above, this model "privileges the transformatory potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication practices in social networks: there is a focus on process and relation."⁹ Thus, while it may be important to identify actors and

7. Ibid., 43.

8. Ibid., 193.

9. Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (Thousand Oaks: Sage University Press, Inc., 2002), 7.

organizations involved, as well as their roles in production and distribution, the intricacies and multiplexity of their relations between one another are the main objective with this practice. The typology is essentially a set of six guiding concepts, divided into two broader sections: products and processes. Products address the text in a sense, looking at content, form, and what Atton calls reprographic innovations and adaptations, which practically refer to the inexpensive technologies that aid alternative media efforts. Processes include distributive use, transformed social relations, and transformed communication methods (27).¹⁰ These aspects are further explained in Chapter 1. Though Atton discusses a broader case of a nationwide press over decades, this model could easily provide insight for a single film production.

But of course, as has been mentioned, for these suggestions to operate adequately, they require considerable social, cultural, and historical contextualization. This requires at least some kind of wide understanding of the time period upon which to hang this case study. In his comprehensive analysis of the Popular Front's influence on American culture and politics, Denning lays out a useful frame for these purposes. He uses C. Wright Mills' unfinished writings on the notion of the cultural apparatus to fashion borders for the media of the era, limited to the "culture industry of leisure and entertainment built on the new technologies of motion pictures, recorded sound, and broadcasting," and "a state cultural bureaucracy collecting, subsidizing, and distributing

10. *Ibid.*, 27.

arts, information, and education through a variety of schools and agencies.”¹¹ This particular structuring of the cultural apparatus is central to understanding *The Plow that Broke the Plains* as an irregular artifact that bridges *both* arenas. Denning also defines the Popular Front social movement (as well as the New Deal) as a Gramscian historical bloc, which is helpful in perceiving it as a free-flowing series of alliances between a plethora of ideologically disparate actors and organizations.¹² These notions provide an excellent foundation from which to explore *The Plow that Broke the Plains*’ radical products and processes.

A different sort of foundation is required for analysis of exhibition of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. It is a peculiar case for its time because it bridged both theatrical and nontheatrical presentation simultaneously. The main understanding of the commercial portion of these screenings will be understood through the work of Douglas Gomery, which examines the socio-economic roots of American exhibition spaces as a business that sought to fabricate the movie-going experience as a cultural necessity regardless of the content that crossed the screen. Schaefer will also provide important insight in this area, but more specifically related to the less standardized or respectable exhibition spaces. For nontheatrical presentations, *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* is a start for considering the rise of educational film production and exhibition, which began to come to a head by 1935, a year before *Plow*’s general release.

11. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 38.

12. *Ibid.*, 6.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis consists of two chapters. Both will involve similar means of historical analysis and sources. The first chapter frames *The Plow that Broke the Plains* along Atton's proposed typology of alternative media using a wide swath of available historical sources, especially those not often found in the above literature. This typology will assist greatly in clarifying the position of the film's radical practices as integral components of its existence in American culture in a manner that does not isolate them from their relationship with institutional norms found within the state or market apparatuses. These will include newspapers, general magazines such as *Scribners*, and film industry trade journals like *Motion Picture Herald*. Certain contributions to discourse by collaborators, such as the film reviews of Pare Lorentz, are required to properly contextualize the alternative media model. A substantial amount of sources were utilized from the Pare Lorentz papers located at the Rare Book and Manuscript library at Columbia University. This archive featured a variety of documents pertaining to the production, distribution, and exhibition of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, including office documents, press clippings, and correspondence between a dizzying array of United States actors and organizations across the country. Certain secondary sources will be required for the same reason, including the ones mentioned in the literature review.

The second chapter addresses *Plow's* alternative distribution practices that challenged the top-down structure of the Hollywood studios that refused to help show the film, and the alternative exhibition spaces, and possibly alternative public sphere that was created from such transformed practices. Though prior literature is largely institutional in

scope, a single case study for such an anomalous production is useful in linking and informing these normally separate considerations. This chapter will utilize booking lists of commercial and noncommercial exhibitions of the film in its early days, found among the Pare Lorentz papers, to see what kinds of spaces elected to show such a politically contentious work in defiance of established customs.

The conclusion of this thesis will not only serve to cohere the line of arguments that span the preceding chapters, but also elucidate the ramifications of the history being told, from the immediate consequences of a short-lived government documentary ‘industry,’ to a reflection on what contemporary culture has to show from the influence of the Popular Front.

Chapter 1: The Production of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* as Alternative Media

In general there was a guerrilla war between the world of art and intellect and the world of politics and business, with the guerrillas winning the war on the battlefields of books, painting, and music, and the establishment so impervious that it did not know it was being attacked.¹³

In this quote, filmmaker Leo Hurwitz is referring specifically to the cultural tension in the post-World-War-I era of Coolidge and Hoover, and yet the words seem to transcend such a historical boundary. In a single sentence it does a marvelous job of identifying and articulating the plight of radical artists in the United States who, for all their disparate experiences and crafts, prevailed against mighty institutions on their own terms without being able to tangibly demonstrate financial successes on the terms of their perceived adversaries such as commercial viability. In the 1930s, Hurwitz was one of many such radicals, driven by both the suffering on the streets that was plainly visible in his native city of New York thanks to the Great Depression and the failure of his beloved cinema to address any of it. However, the indirect historical influence of the American Popular Front, which Denning would argue was the first time the left “had a central, indeed shaping impact on American culture,”¹⁴ did not flourish solely thanks to the stories of those like Hurwitz. It was a period of a loose alliance of disparate leftist actors and organizations both radical and institutional, and this negotiation in this time can be

13. Leo Hurwitz, “One Man’s Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930’s,” *Cinema Journal* 15, no. 1 (1975): 2.

14. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3.

helpful in understanding how radical and alternative media function in American capitalism even today.

The 1936 government-sponsored 25-minute documentary film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, of which Hurwitz was a creative collaborator, marks such an alliance. At the same time that it was, financially and ideologically, a product of Roosevelt's New Deal administration, it was a conscious act of cultural rebellion to the somewhat recently anointed oligopolies formed by commercial film interests stemming from the West Coast. Then, even within the bureaucracy that produced the film, there was a fierce political tension between New Deal interests, represented by the film's director, Pare Lorentz, and its radical-left cameramen. These dynamics that both upheld and subverted the institutional practices of both state and market make it clear that a case like the network of social relations that culminated in the creation of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* cannot be simply defined along binary distinctions between the hegemonic and the radical. Institutional histories, such as those that assess Hollywood's industry or Roosevelt's administration, are inadequate for analyzing an anomalous case like that of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* which was not truly ascribed to either. This chapter parses out some of the film's alternative processes in order to understand the roots of its alternative form and content, but never without the perspective that these aspects functioned in mediation with the standards of the dominant state and commercial norms of the time. The film itself, its production, distribution, and exhibition, all indicate such an intersection involving intentions to broaden a radical movement 'horizontally,' understood at the time as an attempt to foster a socially conscious audience who would

seek a sense of civic identity or education as opposed to just entertainment in their theaters, and ‘vertically,’ meaning a challenge to prevailing power structures in America most apparently manifested as the Hollywood studio system and the federal government.

This case study will attempt to assess these aspects of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* along a typology of alternative media laid out by Chris Atton in 2001 and considerations offered by John D.H. Downing in his book *Radical Media*. I intend to show how its transformed processes and transformed products fluidly informed one another. The reason for the selection of this film as a case in particular is because of its historical position as the inception of a new kind of American documentary, a social documentary, that would, in time, attain international recognition with the subsequent picture *The River* (1938), and eventually find its efforts short-lived, falling prey to Washington politics and global conflict. *Plow’s* critical and cultural success marked the inception of a kind of formalization or institutionalization that began to materialize even by the time *The River* was made; this argument can hopefully illuminate how such a defiantly non-formulaic picture could not only be produced through the government in the first place but attain forms of critical and cultural success, all without sacrificing politically radical intentions. The history of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* demonstrates the efficacy of the Popular Front social movement as a leftist coalition, and that alternative media (beyond just film) can negotiate with institutional practice without totally compromising its social, artistic, or political integrity. This is significant because such content was not only sparse in the dominant American commercial system of cinema production, but actively discouraged by an institution that wanted its carefully

cultivated cultural understanding of film as entertainment to remain a constant. As the 1930s fade from the present, this chapter relies on historical sources, primary and secondary for historical assessment. Nonetheless, these traces of the past, including papers from Pare Lorentz's personal files and various articles in periodicals, can provide a more-than-adequate depiction of the events at hand. I will first provide a brief elaboration on the alternative media typology I will utilize. Then, extensive, historical, social, and cultural context will be provided to properly position the production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in relation to prevailing machinations of power in the United States during the 1930s. Having established this context, this chapter will go on to assess the film and its histories demarcated along Atton's definition of products and processes. This methodology will serve to argue with the socio-cultural and production contexts of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* that a certain kind of radical media content in the interwar period of United States history, the documentary film, was made possible by a state amenable to experimentation and a storm of socio-cultural activity on the left that was willing to confront and subvert previously accepted conventions of the cinema form.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

At the outset, the study of alternative media may appear too wide in scope in its efforts to make any assertions about such disparate instances, across time and geography, of voices outside the status quo finding a voice and an audience through media. This might be a fair criticism if it were not the case that this discipline emphasizes extensive contextualization of a given instance of alternative media, both in terms of its position in time and place as well as how it accesses or subverts conventional modes of production,

distribution, and reception. Importantly, it should be noted that radical practices are understood as a response to various manifestations of hegemonic domination, such as a state or professional industry. For example, in the context of the audio-visual medium, independent video producers in Chile subverted the historical revisionism of Pinochet's prevailing television propaganda by exposing the institutional injustice and repression by his dictatorship.¹⁵ Such an industry might function in a hegemonic manner by having its censorship built into its professionalization. Downing writes that, in such an example, "[r]adical media...have a mission not only to provide facts to a public denied them but to explore fresh ways of developing a questioning perspective on the hegemonic process and increasing the public's sense of confidence in its power to engineer constructive change."¹⁶ Another important factor to note without relaying the book's entire argument is that there has been a propensity, as Downing admits is in his own work, to simplify the opposition between radical and mainstream actors and organizations to a binaristic model that makes generalizations of both sides. It can easily lead to the presumption that the giants of commercial media production are "permanently part of the problem, except on rare and good days."¹⁷ I hope to address and refute this inclination by showing that cooperation between such forces, as is the case with *The Plow that Broke the Plains* to a

15. Rosalind Bresnahan, "Reclaiming the Public Sphere in Chile under Dictatorship and Neoliberal Democracy," in *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives toward a Democratic Public Sphere, Volume 1*, eds. Clemencia Rodríguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2010), 278.

16. John D.H. Downing, Tamara V. Ford, Genéve Gil, and Laura Stein, *Radical Media: Rebellious Communications and Social Movements* (Thousand Oaks: Sage University Press, Inc., 2001), 24.

17. *Ibid.*, ix.

degree, can still result in a product that challenges the politics and policies of its hegemonic partners (though there may always be radical participants who feel dissatisfaction with such a concession).

In his book *Alternative Media*, Chris Atton introduces a typology for the titular concept that frames its practices within a framework of products and processes. This means that relations, or multi-faceted ties between actors and organizations, can potentially elucidate the transformations in practice and communication found in alternative media better than focusing on said individuals or groups in isolation. “The question: What is radical about radical media? then becomes two questions: What is radical about the ways in which the vehicle (the medium) is transformed? and: What is radical about the communication processes (as instances of social relations) employed by that media?”¹⁸ This model consists of six “elements” divided equally between products (form, content, and reprographic innovations and adaptations) and processes (distributive use, transformed social relations, roles, and responsibilities, and transformed communications processes). Content for a documentary film such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* can be understood to include the radical impressions of history and attitude of its subject. Atton simultaneously concedes to the necessary vagueness of defining alternative content and determines that it refers to media involving the “promotion of social change.”¹⁹ Form is the language of the audio-visual experience that presents that content to the viewer and allows it to be understandable. Reprographic

18. Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (Thousand Oaks: Sage University Press, Inc., 2002), 24.

19. *Ibid.*, 14.

innovations and adaptations are, in the context of print, a historical reference to the change in alternative production methods brought on by technological advances that allowed the amateur to create mass quantities of product for circulation in unprecedentedly inexpensive fashion. For documentary and film in the 1930s, this is not as clear-cut an element, especially given that this chapter is oriented around production and text. It makes more sense in the context of film exhibition, which is explored in great detail in Chapter 2. ‘Distributive use’ refers to the actual processes of these alternative conduits of audiences that grew from such technological innovations. Transformed social relations, roles, and responsibilities signify trends such as de-professionalization or complication of conventionally understood production processes. Transformed communication processes involve the empowerment of alternative creators and audiences through alterations in network linkages. “The social processes will activate and inform the development of the products to the extent that each position in a communications circuit...will be amenable to radicalization in terms of products and processes, resources and relations.”²⁰ This argument will be roughly structured around an investigation of these elements and their interrelations. My argument focuses on only a single product, as opposed to an entire industry as Atton does with zine culture. As much as the New Deal filmmaking that occurred from the mid-1930s to the early 1940s featured many alternative practices, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* consisted the most glaring, tense intersections between state bureaucracy, commercial film practices, and radical tendencies against both of these power structures. This case study should serve not only

20. Ibid., 27.

to inform the history of the American Popular Front and documentary film but also the study of alternative media. Many cases are framed around media from new social movements (i.e. decentralized social movements from the 1960s onward); this chapter will demonstrate that this model makes sense within the context of a movement that predates this decentralization of activism.²¹ If this kind of work was a possibility within an American state structure with so, then this history can usefully contribute to the same alternative media discourse that focuses on social change in the wake of counterculture decades later.

FILM AND CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE 1930S

Before delving into the details of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, a foundational understanding of its socio-cultural context must be established (although the majority of the argument will feature a continuation of such contextualization). There are two crucial historical frameworks to note, both laid out aptly by Denning's work *The Cultural Front*. The first in this vein is the concept of the American Popular Front, a short-lived social movement whose existence can be traced through its production of cultural artifacts such as novels, photography, music, and film. Denning defines this movement along the lines of a Gramscian historical bloc, an immeasurably complex network of alliances between individuals and organizations of dissimilar (though mostly left-oriented) ideologies who indirectly influenced politics and culture for decades. As Downing does above, he emphasizes the need to avoid binary simplification of this movement: "It is mistaken to see the Popular Front as a marriage of Communists and liberals. The heart of the Popular

21. Leah Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Front as a social movement lay among those who were non-Communist socialists and independent leftists, working with Communists and with liberals, but marking out a culture that was neither a Party nor a liberal New Deal culture.”²² It will be shown that the production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is a textbook example of such diversity even merely among its four principal collaborators, none of them Communists though they might have been labeled as such in their time. The second point addresses the prevailing establishment of the American cultural apparatus, encompassing the entirety of production as well as distribution of all manner of “artistic intellectual, and scientific work.” Most broadly the apparatus was divided between two major sources: “a culture industry of leisure and entertainment built on the new technologies of motion pictures, recorded sound, and broadcasting; and a state cultural bureaucracy collecting, subsidizing, and distributing arts, information, and education through a variety of schools and agencies.”²³ As much as *The Plow that Broke the Plains* was a product of this ‘state bureaucracy,’ it was created with intentions of permeating the industry through its entertainment theater network. This point emphasizes the need to perceive the picture’s history on its own terms, as its institutional identity was as assorted as the Popular Front social movement itself.

There was government-sponsored film produced before *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, but it was hardly much to build upon as an ‘industry.’ To offer an understanding of its historiography, consider the Film Daily’s Year Book of Motion Pictures for 1936,

22. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 5.

23. *Ibid.*, 38-39.

an approximately 1200-page almanac of film activity in the United States, including a list of every film released up to that point, and every movie theater in America, to name a couple of sections. Government production activity received precisely two pages of coverage in this book, featuring dry elaboration on the activities of each department, including that of the Resettlement Administration, but with no insight into form or content, or persons involved.²⁴ Pare Lorentz, despite having directed a picture of national critical acclaim, did not appear in the comprehensive directors' list.²⁵ The government was simply not perceived as a cultural force in American cinema, regardless of how good or bad their product might have been. Lorentz wrote after finishing his first film that "the so-called educational companies and the routine movie workmen available in Washington produce work so far below the commercial quality of Hollywood [that] audiences simply will not accept them."²⁶ The level of craft and attention put into the production of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was unprecedented for government work.

PROCESSES

The majority of federal employment of creative professionals famously occurred under the umbrella of the Works Progress Administration, but *The Plow that Broke the Plains* was produced under a federal agency known as the Resettlement Administration, a condition that may have contributed to the film's capacity for creative experimentation. It resembled a transformed communication process that very obviously countered the

24. *The 1937 Film Daily Year Book*, ed. Jack Alicoate (The Film Daily, 1937), 854-855.

25. *Ibid.*, 513.

26. Pare Lorentz, Confidential Report, 3, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Hollywood organizational mode of production, but it also ran counter to government film initiatives that preceded it. Most notably, government film by that point in 1936, mostly having come out of the Department of Agriculture, had no aspirations towards seeking nor satisfying a general audience like the films of Pare Lorentz.²⁷ The Resettlement Administration was established in 1935 by Franklin Roosevelt aimed with three directives in mind: the resettlement of “destitute or low-income families from rural or urban areas,” the administration of environmental conservation, and the administration of loans for farm-related needs.²⁸ The idea for the film was argued as a project that would promote these initiatives. The agency’s administrator, Rexford Tugwell, contended in a letter that “the primary object of the motion picture is to help the Resettlement Administration and its employees to visualize and understand better the problems confronting them, and to aid them in the prevention of the results of soil erosion and related problems.”²⁹ This argument was no more than a kind of bureaucratic justification that allowed creative-minded individuals like Roy Stryker and Pare Lorentz to operate within a state system that would have never endorsed their Division of Information if they were completely honest about its functions. This was a carefully constructed legal reasoning for creative exploration. Even before they had fully presented this explanation,

27. Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People’s Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings House, 1973), 44.

28. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Executive Order 7027 of May 1, 1935, Establishing the Resettlement Administration,” (online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15048>).

29. Letter from Rexford G. Tugwell to Comptroller General McCord, August 12, 1935, in Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 202.

ideological tension was revealed when it was discovered that “a lawyer in our Legal Division had been holding up all work because he personally did not approve of the manner in which we were going to make motion pictures.”³⁰ Stryker, who famously directed the division’s regiment of photographers, operated on the surface as a publicity administrator, but his duties were not so rigidly articulated. According to Richard Dyer MacCann, he “got no further instructions about his photographic section than this: ‘We’ve got to tell people about the lower third—how ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed they are.’”³¹ Such a mandate hardly implies any kind of inflexible managerial oversight on Tugwell’s part. Lorentz’s own assistant, Arch Mercey, was assigned for, in his own words, “interpreting Lorentz to the bureaucrats and the bureaucrats to Lorentz.”³² The tension never dissipated; Lorentz detailed his frustrations in a letter to Mercey:

I would like to write, direct, and produce motion pictures but I do not feel it is reasonable to expect me to be an accountant, a salesman, an agent cashier, and a distributor along with these other duties...I have exhausted my personal credit asking people to do favors for the government then finding [sic] weeks later that they have not been paid even through [sic] they accepted lower salaries than is paid in professional work....[I]f I am forced to be an executive, I am going to be an executive and spend the rest of my time writing out orders and signing papers, and if in time someone begins to want a movie, I will at that time again explain that a motion picture is not made behind a desk.³³

In the same letter, Lorentz cited bureaucratic delay as a key point of consternation:

30. Pare Lorentz, Confidential Report, 4, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

31. MacCann, *The People’s Films*, 60.

32. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 27.

33. Letter from Pare Lorentz to Arch Mercey, 14 April 1936, Box 41, Folder 1, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

In Hollywood, people are sore because they have not received checks owing to them for months and in the City I get the same complaint about government delay. I can guarantee that in the future any of these people including laboratories...are going to put a good stiff price up against us to assure interest on the money they have every reason to expect wont [sic] reach them until doomsday.³⁴

This nebulous leadership role relegated to Lorentz appeared to inspire the same kinds of annoyances found in later examples of alternative media models, where a lack of rigidity of process led to forms of office dysfunction.³⁵ His barbs would persist well into post-production, such as when financial accommodation was slow in arriving for the film's irreplaceable composer, Virgil Thomson: "Shall I pay out the \$400 odd dollars remaining of government money and ask for another advance, or shall I put the musician on the cuff, give him a contract, or shall I just leave on the next train!"³⁶ Lorentz also complained that similar financial delays in compensating their chosen film laboratory, H.E.R., were preventing him from being able to cut or develop the picture because of how gradual the process of justifying a private contract was.³⁷ There were even conflicts over film content that arose from these kinds of negotiation; Lorentz could scarcely get a representative of the Soil Conservation Agency to "even admit that certain areas of the great plains were devastated."³⁸ As much as Lorentz was ideologically aligned with New

34. Ibid.

35. Downing, *Radical Media*, 333.

36. Letter from Pare Lorentz to Arch Mercey, 10 December 1935, Box 41, Folder 1, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

37. Letter from Pare Lorentz to John Franklin Carter, 26 November 1935, Box 41, Folder 1, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

38. Ibid.

Deal policies, this tension implies a kind of subverted communication protocol with the state that allowed him to at least partially get out from under the seemingly endless government restrictions and rules in order to make a film not only viable for commercial cinemas, but a work competitive in cinematic quality with the work of Hollywood studios.

In turn, this freeform procedure that stemmed from a lack of real precedent led to a transformed process that the state could never have condoned outright: the hiring of three cameramen fresh out of the rapidly waning Worker's Film and Photo League, an artistic collective rife with Communist associations. Regardless of intention, Lorentz's liberation from the hierarchical command structure of state bureaucracy permitted him to position himself as a bridge between the resources provided by a New Deal infrastructure and the radical political aims of a group of men without any. Granovetter rightly asserted that "no strong tie is a bridge," which stems from the argument that the efficacy of a social network's communication comes through its "weak ties."³⁹ The point is that without this breach in the top-down conventional communication structure, the film would have resembled its dry, utilitarian contemporaries in the realm of government-sponsored film. It required Lorentz as weak tie in the network to access a strain of alternative influences that would dramatically inform the work in both form and content. Mercey, as demonstrated above, resembled a similar juncture to enable Lorentz's less-than-standard methods to function inside a state agency. This is an instance of

39. Mark S. Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1364.

deinstitutionalization as Atton appropriates it from Williams as one of three forms of democratic communication.⁴⁰ This was not entirely an isolated trend. New Deal expansion necessitated new kinds of negotiations between prevailing actors in government bureaucracy and the “radical young lawyers, labor activists, and intellectuals” hired to bolster the ranks.⁴¹ Denning notes that while radical actors were an uncommon sight for leadership roles in New Deal agencies, the rank-and-file had their share, such as the participation of the likes of Orson Welles, composer Charles Seeger, and photographer Berenice Abbott in the Federal Art projects.⁴² The federal cultural apparatus was no longer merely the province of a bureaucratic machine run by practical accountants and policymakers; now it had to contend with creative ideologues who had little interest in justifying their cultural endeavors to administrators.

The Division of Information ultimately outlasted Tugwell’s tenure as the Resettlement Administration became the Farm Security Administration, another notion to its credit as a separately functioning organism. Amid tens of thousands of displaced Americans, the RA could only manage to accommodate a few thousand families from the Great Plains. The original epilogue of the film admitted as much, which seemed an odd comment when the same picture mentions the far greater quantity of suffering souls during its climax.⁴³ This epilogue conspicuously disappeared “sometime in the second or

40. Atton, *Alternative Media*, 4.

41. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 80.

42. *Ibid.*, 79.

43. A. Roger Paxton, “The Neros of the New Deal,” *The New Masses*, July 21, 1936, 9.

third year after [its] appearance.”⁴⁴ Where resettlement only managed to aid a mere fraction of those in need of relief, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* would eventually sell at least 7,500,000 tickets in less than a year.⁴⁵ All profits from such sales were enjoyed by the exhibitors who had agreed to show the film; the Resettlement Administration only ever charged for shipping of the prints, and nothing more.

These three cameramen had never been merely aloof and alone in their cinematic efforts, and just before they were hired to work on *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, they were forced to flee crippling creative institutionalization that had festered within a *radical* collective, the Worker’s Film and Photo League. Not unlike the montage pioneers of documentary of the 1920s in the Soviet Union, Ralph Steiner, Leo Hurwitz, and veteran straight photographer Paul Strand got their start in documentary film in a creatively vibrant and excitable initiative that eventually became dragged down by mandates of formula in line with socialist realism.⁴⁶ This is not so surprising a parallel given that WFPL’s main sponsor was an American strain of a Communist International founded by Vladimir Lenin in the 1920s.⁴⁷ Their interests in formalistic exploration were perceived by others in the group as cripplingly bourgeois and far from what they thought of as the ‘real’ purpose of documentary, to present a purely authentic, objective reality.⁴⁸

44. William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 140.

45. “Seven Millions See Resettlement Film.” *Motion Picture Herald*, April 17, 1937, 33.

46. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 3-64.

47. Russell Campbell, “Radical Cinema in the United States, 1930-1942: The Work of the Film and Photo League, Nykino, and Frontier Films” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1978), 44.

This rift spurred the trio to exit and fabricate their own splinter group which would come to be known as Nykino. Thus, even before they contributed radical tensions to the production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, they were already the alternative to an alternative. Going back to Denning's point, this makes it absolutely clear that the Popular Front social movement was too complicated in its associations to conceptualize it as a simple bridge between communistic individuals (describing none of these cameramen) and New Deal democrats (which is truly only a segment of Lorentz's identity as it relates to the creation of *Plow*). The experiences of these filmmakers before they came to work on *The Plow That Broke the Plains* could be best defined by their capacity for resisting hierarchical mandate, whether directly from their superiors or indirectly from a dominant commercial cultural apparatus.

The context of communistically affiliated politics supports the kind of connection that occurred here. By 1935, American communism started to undergo a transformation that resulted in a decentralization of the cause. Nykino branched off of the more hardline communist Worker's Film and Photo League right around the same time that the Communist International broadened its measures for success abroad, stressing the abandonment of old-school sectarianism.⁴⁹ Barrett writes that an "accomplishment of the Popular Front, then, was to bring Party activists into closer contact with mainstream politics and society and to offer an opening for Communists to immerse themselves in the

48. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 54.

49. James Barrett, "Rethinking the Popular Front," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 4 (2009): 531.

most important social movements of the 1930s and 1940s.”⁵⁰ Party identity underwent a deconstruction that made the cause more mutable and amenable to the American experience, and this allowed Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand to engage and access a powerful portion of the prevailing cultural apparatus.

The shooting of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* featured an unconventional production process that might not be described as ‘democratic,’ a designation Downing would assign for radical media, but was no doubt transformed relative to the standard producer-unit system coming out of Hollywood in the era.⁵¹ The 1930s had seen new divisions of producer power in Hollywood, but they still remained the most powerful collaborators on film projects, and the aims of production remained, as always, about standardization.⁵² While the power of the director waned on the West Coast in the studios, the Resettlement Administration, in spite of harboring commercial aspirations for their product, had no incentive to maintain a watchful eye on Lorentz’s project. He wound up vastly exceeding his assigned budget of \$6,000, causing him to personally fund the picture’s eventual cost of \$19,260.⁵³ In addition, a meeting with the Treasury department did not do enough to convince them to reimburse Lorentz with his odd gaggle of receipts. MacCann elaborates: “[Lorentz] had incurred a few expenses. He was only

50. Ibid., 543.

51. Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 76.

52. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 322.

53. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 37.

indistinctly aware that this this created a problem...It seemed that the bundle of receipts he brought back from his Midwestern expedition—some of them scratched on wrapping paper—were not instantly exchangeable for cash.”⁵⁴ Lorentz had subverted the elusive problem of accountability to his ‘sponsors,’ an issue that future producers of alternative media would identify as an eternal struggle, though he could never have accomplished such a feat without his own wealth amassed from a successful writing career.

And yet, fascinatingly, this lack of bureaucratic oversight did not enable Lorentz the creative autonomy he sought until he was forced to fire his cameramen. He was the film’s director, but despite a honed cinematic sense from many years as a film critic, he had no production experience. Upon being hired, the cameramen were the first ones to draft an outline, one permeated with a radical anticapitalist tone. Alexander notes radical filmmaking contemporary Irving Lerner’s assessment of the outline, saying that it “embodied a concept of epic implications: capitalism’s anarchic rape of the land, and—by extension—the impoverishment of the natural resources of America: mines, forests, men.”⁵⁵ From this, Lorentz put together a shooting script, one that was, according to Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand, indecipherable and incompatible with film language. They also took offense to what they described as having “their outline’s biting criticism remanded to poetic indirection.” Lorentz was not even present for their first on-location shoot in Montana. Without any real guidance from their director, the cameramen shot the film’s opening, which featured the gorgeous, untamed grasslands of America’s high

54. MacCann, *The People’s Films*, 67.

55. Irving Lerner, “*The Plow that Broke the Plains*”, *New Theatre*, July, 1936, 18, cited in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 98.

plains. This instance of creative tension speaks to the production's less-than-hierarchical procedure, and it was far from the only time they butted heads. Hurwitz and Strand, in particular, sought to test their agency in the production by drafting their own shooting script, convinced they could have a chance to bring the long-hidden human suffering of the Depression to a wide audience. Strand wrote in a letter to his photographic contemporary Alfred Stieglitz that "the man we are working under is an imbecile."⁵⁶ Lorentz ultimately rejected their script, and the ideological conflicts eventually culminated in the trio walking off the picture and renouncing their credits.⁵⁷ However, unbeknownst to its creators, the film would never find itself liberated from this tension between collaborators, despite Lorentz's eventual autonomous control of post-production, as will be demonstrated below.

One especially notable aspect of the production process, which actually sprouted from budgetary restrictions more than anything, was the enthusiastic cooperation of the film's subjects, the inhabitants of the region afflicted by the Dust Bowl. Their participation resembled more than just the chance to be in a moving picture: "The plains people, for all their hopelessness, were not self-conscious about acting before cameras. Movie-wise, they thought it not at all strange that a film should be made of their plight and they, the real victims, should portray their own tragedy."⁵⁸ Neither contemporary documentary filmmaking nor modern radical media empowerment strategies are

56. *Ibid.*, 98-99.

57. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 31.

58. "Dust Storm Film," *Literary Digest*, May 16, 1936, 22.

strangers to this level of cooperation, and in fact it seems a primary consideration,⁵⁹ but here, it was merely a shrewd business decision; Lorentz did not have the money to hire professional actors for his cinematic endeavor.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the consequences of this transformation of the role and relation of the subject to the filmmaker significantly informed the eventual product as an inceptive work of documentary.

The history of the creation and release *The Plow That Broke the Plains* featured direct confrontations with the power center of major Hollywood producers and distributors in more than one instance (its distribution and exhibition conflicts will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis), and their distaste for the Resettlement Administration's project became more than apparent when Lorentz traveled to California to secure additional found footage to aid in post-production. He was on the hunt for footage related to the harvesting of wheat, and while he had initially received the assent of unnamed "major companies" to attain such material for "outrageous prices,"⁶¹ their permission was "rescinded...because of political pressure from head offices."⁶² He was locked out of every archive in Los Angeles. It was only through the aid of his colleague in Hollywood, leftist director King Vidor, that Lorentz was able to secure the ancillary

59. Clemencia Rodriguez, *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizens' Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2001), 1-23.

60. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 26.

61. Telegram from Pare Lorentz to Arch Mercey, date unknown (1935 or 1936), Box 41, Folder 4, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

62. Telegram from Pare Lorentz to John Carter, date unknown (1935 or 1936), Box 41, Folder 4, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

film content he required.⁶³ The resolution of this production issue necessitated the exploitation of a horizontal social relation between like-minded ideologues that defied hierarchical procedure. The line had been drawn in the sand.

The processes that culminated in *The Plow that Broke the Plains* were a rebellion against predominant norms that stupefy any attempt to qualify the operation as standardized. It was not radical like the days of the Worker's Film and Photo League, wherein volunteers scrambled with sparse technological offerings to produce documentaries in the vein of revolution, nor was it a strictly bureaucratic process that had already resulted in so many government films that satisfied its sponsors but bored everyone else. For example, MacCann singles out the film program of the Interior Department for making "fairly humdrum products" about state parks and the department's activities "which, however much they might brighten a grade school classroom, were not planned as contributions either to controversy or art."⁶⁴ Lorentz would reflect soon after completing and releasing *The Plow That Broke the Plains* that their greatest advantage was their commitment to the depiction of a real locale: "We had one advantage in that...Hollywood will not photograph America itself, preferring always to fake or manufacture outdoor scenes. Thus, we did have an entirely new locale as a dramatic ingredient."⁶⁵ His grounds for breaking rank with Hollywood practice in this matter was practically spiritual, and that romanticism of the land would bleed through in

63. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 32.

64. MacCann, *The People's Films*, 47.

65. Pare Lorentz, Confidential Report, 3, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

the film's ultimate form. For both parties, however, it was a conscious rebellion against the commercial apparatus that dominated popular imagination with fantasies that ignored any semblance of Depression-era reality, a short-lived association of disparately left-thinking actors that did truly succeed in challenging a mutual foe, right down to their methodology of production (Lorentz's own contributions to this discourse can be found in Chapter 2).

PRODUCTS

The Plow That Broke the Plains is a film that attempts to convey the history of the Great Plains in the United States from early pioneering days all the way to the present, where the Dust Bowl has ravaged a substantial portion of this once fertile landscape. It features nine sequences (divided that way in the script) spurred in dramatic appeal by lyrical narration that contextualizes the imagery with historical fact and an emotional musical score by Virgil Thomson. The story opens with a depiction of the pastoral origins of early Western settlers of the plains, showing gorgeous vistas of untapped meadowlands and massive herds of cattle that evoke the style of the Soviet innovator of poetic cinema, Alexander Dovzhenko. The ensuing narrative details the deterioration of this landscape and way of life. Scenes of tractors tilling the land to excess are intercut with rolling fleets of tanks signifying World War I, a montage that argues the war economy's necessity for grain contributed to the devastation of the Great Plains environment as well as its agricultural industry. The film's most potent emotional appeal occurs in revealing the outcome for those with nowhere left to go. The same migrant workers that Steinbeck famously dramatized in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* are shown

in the second-to-last sequence of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* in reality, with families loading their entire lives onto large trucks and heading west towards the possibility of a fresh start. The picture concludes with a tragic denouement that wordlessly features panoramas of a once-fertile landscape transformed into a desert while Thomson's music takes the lead and hammers home the epic sadness of these conditions.

Most of the film was shot on-location across the United States and featured real denizens of rural America in dramatic reenactments of historical experiences. At times the film includes found footage to fill in narrative gaps, including an archaic practice of wheat-harvesting as well as the aforementioned tanks. Along Wees' typology of found footage use, *Plow* is a work of 'compilation,' using the footage to directly express a sense of reality.⁶⁶ This technique functions in contrast to other sequences of the picture, which fall more in line with modernistic montage experimentation by the likes of Dziga Vertov, such as when the passage of time after the war is expressed through a flurry of ethereally floating newspaper headlines and flyers offering cheap land in the area before everything comes crashing down.

Renov's following statement is almost entirely accurate: "[A]n historical consciousness is essential for an analysis of the conceptual foundations of documentary film and video. Such an analysis must place the domain of nonfiction texts and practices within a century of cinematic forms as well as their photographic precursors."⁶⁷ The problematic term is "precursors," because for the works of the Resettlement

66. William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).

67. Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

Administration, and eventually the Farm Security Administration, documentary photography and documentary film were solid contemporaries, different modes with the same aim, that not only operated out of the same office but featured constant crossover of involved actors. It is a mistake not to consider them in thorough tandem. Lorentz utilized the abilities of Roy Stryker's team of photographers, dispatching them for purposes of preliminary research before he set out to make his film.⁶⁸ Dorothea Lange even helped him to shoot the sequence related to migrant workers in California after Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand had departed.⁶⁹ The network of creative actors between the two modes was a single, densely associated entity; the modes were not segregated in form, content, nor practice.

Stott's elaboration on the formulation of the social document in the 1930s aids this argument. He points out that in the context of its development, "the heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content."⁷⁰ He assigns a kind of formalism that delineates documentary content into two tendencies: the capacity to inform through a "direct" presentation of reality, and the more "vicarious," imaginary style that delivers this reality in a kind of indirect manner.⁷¹ *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, more than its photographic contemporaries, leans heavily, though not exclusively, on the latter consideration. The narrative is not remotely an attempt to depict a specific

68. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 28.

69. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 101.

70. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 14.

71. *Ibid.*, 26-45.

place in time; it presents the story of the American inhabitation of the Great Plains over entire decades. Its opening sequence, featuring the lush, untouched grasslands of an area in Montana, stands as a historical icon of a pre-industrial period. Within the narrative, they are not the specific meadows of Montana but an expression of a dreamlike, nigh-infinite span of untamed environment. This expression is comparable to the animated geographic representation of the region that precedes the sequence, an ethereal, pastoral imaginary rather than a factual sort of truth. The closer the historical narrative gets to the present in its later sequences, the more it engages Stott's notion of the direct and especially begins to resemble the work of Resettlement Administration photographers. The most analogous comparisons involve the stark, non-stylized depiction of impoverished farmers and migrant workers. Two notable conditions lend to the potency of the images. First, they involved the enthusiastic cooperation of the subjects, as noted above. The second was, of course, the vicarious element, the "staging" of scenes that always arises as a hollow criticism of the documentary form, as it did in this case. It was just as facile an argument levied against the likes Arthur Rothstein, or any of these RA/FSA photographer, such as when he asked his subjects to pose in a specific manner for his most famous work from 1936, "Fleeing a Dust Storm."

What Stott describes here turned out to be the perennial debate for the documentary form surrounding the question of the 'truth.' This is, in fact, part of the radical affinities of the majority of the actors involved in the production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, a notion incompatible with state considerations. Nichols writes that "[f]rom the vantage point of the avant-garde, the state and issues of citizenship were

obscured by questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics and ethics, behavior and the unconscious, actions and desire. These questions were more challenging imperatives than those that preoccupied the custodians of state power.”⁷² He is speaking to the preoccupations of modernism that saturated the aesthetics of the era. The connection for Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand is simple and obvious. Strand is especially conspicuous as one of the pioneers of modernistic photography in the United States. As noted above, their propensity for these kinds of pursuits were at odds with the aims of the Communist hierarchy that governed the Worker’s Film and Photo League. For someone like Roy Stryker, his writings make lucid the parallels found even in the minds of those ideologically aligned with the status-quo, especially in comparison to the far more conservative impression of the medium developing under John Grierson in the United Kingdom. He wrote that “the documentary attitude is not a denial of the plastic elements which must remain essential criteria in any work. It merely gives these elements limitation and direction. Thus composition becomes emphasis.”⁷³ He speaks to the impossibility of expressing cold truth with a camera, and that there is a diligence and awareness that the documentary photographer must have in their procedure that justifies the use of staging a scene as long as it remains true. The same philosophy was true for *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. When a farmer grasps dry dirt in his hands as the narration laments the subtle decay of a way of life, there is no way the reaction is some

72. Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 583.

73. Roy E. Stryker, “Documentary Photography,” in *The Complete Photographer*, ed. Willard D. Morgan (New York: National Educational Alliance, Inc., 1943), 1180.

kind of genuine, spontaneous reaction, but it does not betray the conditions nor the sentiment that the filmmakers encountered on their long expedition. This is documentary lyric that bares the truth of a dire situation in a manner that the entertainment industry would not dare address. The same motif would be utilized in John Ford's cinematic adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) when Muley Graves makes his plea to stay on his own land, once the plight of the Great Depression was deemed commercially viable by the massive success of John Steinbeck's book.

Part of this is what feels so odd about considering certain aesthetic aspects of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* on formalistic terms: the hiring of on-location denizens, as described above, the implementation of the expository mode or the Voice of God narration as Nichols would describe it,⁷⁴ and the modernistic fragmentation of a decades-long history told in 25 minutes were not thanks to processes born of some wellspring of creative inspiration or a series of collective artistic revelations. They were simply practical means to enable the film to even be completed. These transformed products were the result of alternative processes that *had* to happen because the hegemonic formula found in the commercial filmmaking apparatus deemed any nonstandard methods an unnecessary risk. Lorentz had designs on making a work that could compete with Hollywood cinema, but the only way to accomplish it involved intense compromise of vision that could fit the Resettlement Administration's low financial affordance for the project. It was this motivation, combined with the radical creative desires of Lorentz,

74. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 34-38.

Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand, that shaped this anomalous work of narrative film, not merely the latter.

But on the note of the latter, the content of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* can be understood, at least in part, as the outcome of the ideological tensions that happened on the shoot. The theme of human suffering, while certainly regarded by Lorentz to a point, was the cameramen's argument for the focal point of the feature's narrative, enough that he disagreed with their approach. In an interview in 1939, "[h]e said they wanted it to be all about human greed, and how lousy our social system was. And he couldn't see what this had to do with dust storms."⁷⁵ Hurwitz and Strand in particular wanted to bring the reality of the Depression to movie screens just as they had attempted to do at the Worker's Film and Photo League. Lorentz saw their intended tone, perhaps accurately, as anticapitalistic. However, he personally strove to conceptualize the Dust Bowl issue in *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in a fashion that neither the federal government, the Resettlement Administration, nor his collaborators gave such precedence: addressing the devastation of the environment itself. After all, the film readily admits in its preface that it is "a record of land...of soil, rather than people—a story of the Great Plains." The narrative follows through with this premise; humans are inhabitants of this land, and have their experiences upon it, but *The Plow that Broke the Plains* both begins and ends with wide pans of the environment, from serene, blissful grasslands to the dry death of the desert. Some time after production, he would write, "I was more concerned about Texas

75. W.L. White, "Scribner's Examines: Pare Lorentz," *Scribner's Magazine* 105, no. 1, January 1939, 9.

and the end of the grasslands than I was about people.”⁷⁶ This condition, this privileging of the environment as the tragedy, was one controversial step, but the accusation that the catastrophe was caused by human hands was a truly radical point of view. This was occurring at a time when members of Congress were even denying its very existence.⁷⁷ Only more recently has there even been historical consensus that the Dust Bowl was both a condition that affected a huge region of the United States and Canada as well as the product of industrial and agricultural misuse of the land.⁷⁸ If this film had truly been made under Roosevelt’s nose, as countless detractors would be quick to accuse *The Plow that Broke the Plains* of, it would not have been able to engage the environmental themes that it does. Nichols very correctly points out that “[t]he radical potential of the film to contest the state and its law, as well as to affirm it, made documentary an unruly ally of those in power.”⁷⁹ It was precisely thanks to a transformed production process that this content could be put together and shown in theaters in the form of this film in the 1930s.

All of this content and presentation of history was not without its problematic limitations. As much as it claims to be simply a ‘story of the Great Plains,’ it is more accurately framed around what was surely a dominant conception of *American* history beginning with the arrival of the white settler. The film’s prologue, written by Lorentz,

76. Pare Lorentz, “Dorothea Lange: Camera with a Purpose,” *U.S. Camera Annual* 1 (1941): 98, cited in Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 106.

77. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 23.

78. Harry C. McDean, “Dust Bowl Historiography,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 6 (1986): 117-26, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1968&context=greatplainsquarterly>.

79. Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” 583.

utters as what today appears as an eerily cold, factual prelude that “[b]y 1880 we had cleared the Indian, and with him, the buffalo, from the Great Plains, and established the last frontier...” Twentieth century American culture was far from shearing itself of dreams of manifest destiny. As much as the Popular Front historical bloc was greatly defined by the unification of disparate racial backgrounds under a ubiquitous movement of the American laborer, their inclusion as an afterthought in *The Plow That Broke the Plains* is evidence that the indigenous American apparently remained behind, as it had always been and would be for subsequent decades, as a cultural other. This was not merely a matter of not being part of the general fabric of the government’s cultural apparatus, either. In 1936 and 1937 *The Plow That Broke the Plains* circulated through 197 Native American schools and/or communities across the country.⁸⁰ This point helps to illustrate that while such counterhegemonic practices in media in the United States were truly radical, they had privileges as members of an American society that presented limitations to their visions. Being able to examine this history from the distant future makes this point all the more clear.

CONCLUSION

The production of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* was a tenuous negotiation between radical actors and processes and a state apparatus too busy to know it was taking a stand. The state itself, in its ultimate outcome of challenging the domain of bigtime commercial producers (at least in the view of both Pare Lorentz and those very

80. *The Plow That Broke the Plains* Circulation Schedule for U.S. Indian Service, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

producers), became the alternative adversary to the dominance of wary studios. They never conceded this kind of power in the name of private enterprise, but films like *The Plow that Broke the Plains* remain as historical artifacts of an era where an alliance between New Deal and radical left actors fabricated an alternative cultural option to an institution that had no interest or incentive to address socio-political content when entertainment was so easily raking in the bills (this matter receives more attention in Chapter 2). The successes of the Popular Front social movement were not measurable through institutional understandings like financial impact or state influence through policy. The transformed practices and products themselves *were* the success. The processes prove that even before the decentralization of new social movements, radical actors could engage the cultural apparatus by cooperating with state powers without significantly compromising the efficacy of their intended message. The products show that forsaking the narrative filmmaking formula not only did little to harm the cinematic effect of the end result, but also managed to create an entirely new mode of narrative, an American brand of documentary filmmaking. The strength of alternative media cannot flourish without watchful attention to the kinds of intersections discussed here, nor the willingness to engage them.

Chapter 2: Distribution, Exhibition, and Alternative Audiences

The Plow That Broke the Plains was completed in the first half of 1936, a time in which the American cultural perception of film was in flux. The Dutch documentary genius Joris Ivens had made landfall in the United States in what would turn out to be a protracted creative stay that would influence a generation of aspiring radical artists. One year earlier, Iris Barry's Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art was shifting the impression of a movie from transient pleasure to analyzable cultural object. Teachers and school administrators were beginning to think of media's potential in the classroom, aided by the technological onset of affordable 16mm sound projectors. Multiple parties were claiming film in a plethora in fashions counter to the perception of the medium as expendable entertainment that had been so carefully refined by the American studio system through the 1920s and 30s.

Within this flurry of cinematic activity, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* became a major participant in a variety of new social and political movements that served as a point of solidarity for a variety of actors and organizations interested in re-conceptualizing the utility of film. Some of these dealings were politically motivated; New Deal advocates and far-left anti-capitalists alike sought to exploit the film as a democratic call-to-arms. Others had more innocuous aims with *Plow*, such as the promotion of progressive education or the consideration of film as art. It was, to many, a cinematic pariah and a direct challenge to the dominant, unwavering media monopoly maintained by the classical Hollywood studio system. For its primary creative contributor, Pare Lorentz, this challenge and drive to make a film with high-enough production quality to ensure its

viability for conventional commercial theatrical distribution and exhibition was the result of years of personal distaste for the way American film business was conducted as well as a belief in the capability of theatrical audiences to see films as more than matinee entertainment. The ways in which this film was valued, or denounced, were staggeringly varied. This chapter is oriented around a two-pronged question that can potentially organize this chaotic history: How were these socio-cultural boundaries redrawn or challenged through the process of *Plow*'s distribution, and what kinds of audiences were either sought out by the Division of Information or came to it all on their own? All of these complex and often disparate social exchanges can be parsed through an examination of the processes of the film's exhibition and distribution, thus providing a map of the American Popular Front of the 1930s as a historical bloc in action, the rising movement of media as a tool of progressive education, and cultural conceptions of film that defied the status quo of top-down cultivation. The film's varied audiences were not merely a mainstream movie-going population, a group of cultural elites, or represented by regional boundaries. They were members of a new kind of national imaginary that would influence the direction of culture and politics in the United States for decades.

By examining the distribution and exhibition practices of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, one can envision its unique socio-cultural trajectory that accessed such a diverse array of American institutional arenas in a manner that previous histories of the film and its contexts have only managed to divulge a small piece each. To only place it in the context of other documentaries of the era, for example, would betray its capacity to circulate to audiences far beyond the reach of avant-garde radical circles that made such

experiments or even that of the newsreels coming out of major studios. Even the notion of a Popular Front movement, unpredictably amorphous in behavior and ideological identification, fails to encapsulate the menagerie of spaces and people on the film's path in 1936.

This historical analysis is based upon research of the *Plow That Broke the Plains* materials contained within the Pare Lorentz Papers, an eclectic set of primary sources that features Resettlement Administration correspondence, relevant news articles, promotional material, and other assorted ephemera. There are inter-office correspondences that detail the intricacies and goals of the distribution process for the film. Also, very importantly, there is a wealth of correspondence with parties located across the United States consisting of appeals for exhibition, discussions of the fiery political context of the situation, and post-exhibition reviews and responses. In addition, many other sources, mainly articles from newspapers and magazines, are utilized from the Media History Digital Library. Despite relying heavily upon a lone core of content to glean historical truths, and the fact that this is essentially a set of information curated by an intensely involved party, the film's director, there is a considerable variety of perspectives and sources found in these dusty folders, both praise-ridden and critical, enough so that serious questions of validity are unfounded. While *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was exhibited across the country for several years, this chapter will almost entirely focus on the year of its initial release, 1936, in order to pay closer attention to the 'early adopters' who chose to involve themselves with a film that had become the root of a nationally recognized controversy centered between private commercial power and the

state, but will expand into 1937 to exhibit the full blossoming of numerous alternative spaces of exhibition. In addition, it marks the Resettlement Administration's time before Rexford Tugwell, the office's founder and administrator, resigned in disgrace due to the limited tangible results of successful resettlement, and a reassessment of the agency's priorities took place.

The first part of this chapter will involve separating out and understanding the crucial context of how these hegemonic networks, the Hollywood studio system and the American federal government, shaped the cultural canvas upon which *The Plow That Broke the Plains* would be painted. Upon establishing these stakes, the more direct negotiations that led to the film's widespread release can be built upon a stable frame of power mediation. The subsequent content will involve organizing and typifying these various outside parties that opted to involve themselves with screening the film in question.

Essentially, it is important to understand that the actions of the Division of Information within the Resettlement Administration were not merely the practical negotiations of a government bureaucracy, although they were certainly accountable to the one that oversaw them, but those of an organization featuring primary actors that had aspirations independent of the conventional federal gatekeepers of the American cultural apparatus. Denning argues, "the New Deal expansion of the state apparatuses extended far beyond the relief projects and, as radical young lawyers, labor activists, and intellectuals were hired by government bureaucracies, political and cultural battles increasingly took place within, as well as outside and against, federal agencies and

departments.”⁸¹ The Resettlement Administration was no stranger to these battles, and the release of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was a venture into unique cultural territory. By the time Pare Lorentz’s second film, *The River*, was released in 1937, that same landscape was already far less hostile. The myriad ideas of what these kinds of films could mean to society, (documentaries, ‘films of merit,’ classroom tools) were already a part of cultural discourse, thanks to the nontraditional, alternative practices of the Resettlement Administration and the theatre owners, schools, colleges, labor unions, and other organizations across the country that negotiated with them.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Long before New Deal expansion led to the establishment of organizations like the Resettlement Administration or the time Roosevelt was even in office, the government and major Hollywood studios were struggling for power over the manner in which film production, distribution, and exhibition were to be regulated. One of the more significant battles specifically concerned the regulation of film content, or censorship, as it would be called by anyone who was threatened by it. The efforts to release *The Plow That Broke the Plains* came in the middle of a conflict that had begun years before.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc. was a trade group established in 1922 to represent the interests of film industry, and it eventually became an institution of self regulation that would attempt to appease public desires, governmental and otherwise, for careful consideration of what should be allowed to be projected on

81. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 80.

giant screens in the United States. Before it reached that point, however, the organization was opposed to any idea of public censorship. In a speech in 1924, MPPDA president Will Hays deemed it “as ineffective in execution as it is un-American in conception.”⁸² This kind of statement implied a conservative attitude that had captured the country’s social direction during the presidential reign of Warren G. Harding. It cannot be ignored that Hays’ career was staunchly embedded in politics. He served as chairman of the Republican National Committee, ran Warren G. Harding’s successful presidential campaign, and would serve on his cabinet as Postmaster General before becoming a major player in Hollywood.⁸³

At the same time, a different kind of business, the exhibition of motion pictures, was seeking to define itself as an American cultural mainstay. One company, Balaban & Katz, would almost singlehandedly shape a culture of audiences familiar even to cinema patrons today. The rise of movie theater popularity had a great deal less to do with film content as much as being a concerted effort on the part of businessmen to present theater spaces as a cultural necessity to the community. They accomplished this by meticulously fabricating a comfortable, classy aesthetic through locations centralized in cities, attention to architecture, accommodating customer service, live stage shows (in light of not initially having access to top Hollywood product), and the promise of air

82. “Czar of Movies Hits Censorship,” *The Spokesman-Review*, January 25, 1924, 7.

83. Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 26.

conditioning.⁸⁴ These houses were no longer nickelodeons; they were palaces of pleasure, and the moviegoer's experience consisted of far more than gazing upon the latest photoplay. The very idea of 'entertainment' was being defined for the twentieth century, and whoever had the reins had a kind of cultural power. This would come into play once the purveyors of a curious two-reel documentary called *The Plow That Broke the Plains* would try to break into the space between the curtains. In little time, the power encased within exhibition networks would be firmly within the grip of major studios.

Eventually, the production industry succumbed to self-regulation, partly to avoid independent film-doctoring by state boards who each had their own perceptions of filmic decency and were proceeding without Hollywood's input. Hays propagated the popular notion that there was a line of decency to be drawn for America's blooming audio-visual entertainment industry, and the organization's efforts to engineer film's sanctity were driven, at least in part, by community organizations such as the Catholic Legion of Decency by the mid-1930s.⁸⁵ By the time *The Plow That Broke the Plains* hit the scene in 1936, major studios like RKO and Warner were entirely beholden to a Production Code, and their films could not be shown in a mainstream theater without the MPPDA's seal of approval.

This was, for the corporate side of the film industry, something of a triumph against interference from outside interests; to others, like an outspoken film critic at the time named Pare Lorentz, it was the formation of a domineering system that was

84. Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 43-54.

85. Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 2.

recklessly sterilizing content found on movie screens without any semblance of logic or informed judgment. In an essay he penned in 1930 entitled “Moral Racketeering in the Movies,” Lorentz intellectually eviscerated the prevailing practices of censorship of American films. His words lend illumination to his future struggles as a filmmaker:

Never has an art form been subjected to such control. If to-morrow you were to organize a company and make a movie, what could you do with it? You would need a theatre....Suppose you hired a small independent theatre. In six States the censors have the power to forbid absolutely the appearance of your work, a volunteer group of women demands the right to pass on your work before the public has a chance to praise or condemn it. How can a foreign producer present his work to the public unless he joins the Hays organization, unless he grants every demand of the theatre owners, who happen to be competing producers? There is no way out. Free speech, opinion, art; such words fade into the dim record of another day when you approach the movie industry. It is ruled by fear...⁸⁶

Lorentz is referencing what is recognized today as vertical integration. He would double down on this kind of critical invective with a book he co-wrote with Morris Ernst entitled *Censored: The Private Life of the Movie*, which featured detailed instances of commercial productions undergoing content assessment by state and studio censors. Will Hays received his own chapter entitled “The Bishop of Hollywood.”⁸⁷ These public, well-circulated comments were not unnoticed by organizations such as the MPPDA; they had a copy of “Moral Racketeering” on file in their office.⁸⁸ Whether this played into the Resettlement Administration’s eventual distribution conflict remains a mystery without a

86. Pare Lorentz, “Moral Racketeering in the Movies,” *Scribners*, September 1930, 262.

87. Morris L. Ernst and Pare Lorentz, *Censored: The Private Life of the Movie* (New York: Cornwall Press Inc., 1930), <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011025742;view=1up;seq=1>.

88. Record #1602, Reel 8, MPPDA Digital Archive, Flinders University, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/1602>.

smoking gun, but Lorentz's extreme convictions would no doubt influence the manner in which the Division of Information of the Resettlement Administration represented both itself and *The Plow That Broke the Plains* publicly. The fact is that while the government had made films and distributed them nationwide for exhibition, no such effort had ever so brazenly attempted to break into Hollywood's carefully cultivated moviegoing profit centers until Lorentz was involved.

By the time the 1930s rolled around, the five largest studios in Hollywood had attained considerably dominant control of major theater circuits in the United States through vertical integration and the power of their distribution networks. According to Douglas Gomery, "this amounted to coordinated national power, based on movie exhibition."⁸⁹ This power did not even require the absolute control of every screen in the country; it consisted of a specific targeting of movie palaces, which generally had greater audience capacity than most other American commercial spaces, that ensured control of a majority of total receipts. Once they had bought up these big circuits, they directly had access to around 75% of Hollywood box office dollars.⁹⁰ The owners of these theatres, as well as the independent exhibitors attempting to compete with these circuits, were at the mercy of the production industry. Through the mass-implementation of a distribution technique known as 'run-zone-clearance,' these studios were able to ensure that they could squeeze every last potential cent out of a movie by charging exorbitant prices for first runs, then gradually bleeding it through smaller theaters for lower prices in

89. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 57.

90. *Ibid.*, 60.

subsequent months.⁹¹ Through this power they were also able to propagate the practice of block booking, or forcing theatres to accept contracts for studios' A-pictures as long as they also agreed to screen their lower-budgeted B-movies without even allowing them to be seen beforehand.⁹²

This obviously led to substantial consternation on the part of independent exhibitors who had no agency in their own business. A united national front of independent theatre circuits known as Allied States Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors, which happened to include at least five such circuits that would be among the first to exhibit *The Plow That Broke the Plains*,⁹³ was particularly vocal. Block booking and blind selling were particular sticking points for them, and they lobbied to federal powers to make such business practices illegal;⁹⁴ legislation was introduced in the time period but the practice was not outlawed until 1948 by the hand of the Supreme Court.⁹⁵

Amidst the rift between government and industry over regulation of film, these independent exhibitors deemed both of them associated enemies, likely to their cause's detriment. They fairly attested that "the truth of the situation has never reached the President's ears, so surrounded is he by former representatives of the motion picture

91. Ibid., 67.

92. Hilary Radner, "Block Booking," in *The Routledge Companion to Film History*, ed. William Guynn (New York: Routledge, 2011).

93. Booking List for *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1 September 1936, Box 43, Folder 5, Pare Lorentz papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

94. Allied States, "White Book," 24 December 1935, Record #2473, Reel 10, MPPDA Digital Archive, Flinders University, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/2473>

95. Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115-116. E-book.

trust” and that Harry Warner, co-founder of Warner Brothers, “is a friend of the President and one of the largest individual contributors to his campaign fund.”⁹⁶ Indeed, these exhibitors had little to play with the hand they were dealt; without powerful allies in either the state or the market, their complaints went largely unheeded. As will be demonstrated in the next section, when the mainstream ostracizing of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* became a national news item, the details of its creation through a federal agency were irrelevant. Despite its federal affiliation, the incentive to go against the grain appeared too rich. The film became valued by these exhibitors as an opportunity to make a statement through its booking where conventional avenues of business had failed them.

As with the previous chapter, this institutional backdrop of the United States federal government and the main five commercial studios that controlled the most profitable exhibition circuits is essential in understanding the behavior of the Division of Information as it attempted to distribute *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, because despite whatever success it ultimately attained in being seen by an audience, it was perennially at the mercy of both the bureaucracy under which it operated and the economic arrangements of cinema that, at the time, was meticulously crafted from the top down. This much has been demonstrated in prevailing literature on Pare Lorentz and American documentary in the 1930s. By examining the pathway of distribution and exhibition of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, one can perceive culture from the perspective of less powerful, less hierarchically oriented actors and organizations who affected economic

96. Allied States bulletin, 11 July 1934, Record #2307, Reel 10, MPPDA Digital Archive, Flinders University, <http://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/2307>.

and institutional impact within an environment of formidable opposition.

DISTRIBUTION AND CHALLENGES WITH THE STATUS QUO

The political climate around the time of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*' release in 1936 was tense and divisive, and the mood was amplified by the fact that it was an election year. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies and agencies were attempting to realize all manner of lofty social dreams, and this expansion of governmental influence was met more and more with vocal ire from conservative officials and citizens. The Resettlement Administration was far from the only agency employing creative professionals; in fact, the Division of Information was a small media office compared to the Works Progress Administration's artistic projects. In April of 1936, the WPA came under political fire for indicating plans to produce "something like fifty" newsreels detailing the operations of various departmental units, to which Congressional representatives scoffed as an attempt by numerous politicians to positively represent whatever government pet project they oversaw.⁹⁷ To political detractors, the cinematic efforts of any New Deal agency of the time were cut from the same cloth. At an early screening of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* hosted by the National Fact Finders, a New York women's organization, Hallie Flanagan, the national director for the Federal Theatre Project, publicly defended her work. She slyly suggested that these federal expenditures on culture (the vast majority of which were spent on salaries) were "not exorbitant for six or nine months of creative effort from which the community benefits. It

⁹⁷. "Washington Seethes with Charges of Political Chicanery," *Motion Picture Herald*, June 20, 1936, 18.

has been estimated that it costs more to blow a man to pieces in the trenches.”⁹⁸ One conservative article tinted with biting wit from *The Sun* in New York less than a month later inquired about the disparity between offices that had the same goals: “At present there appears to be a motion picture division in every department in the Government, and at the opening of the new Interior Department building, for example, photographic representatives from more than ten different agencies were on hand.”⁹⁹ To the critic, these were matters of wasteful spending and symptomatic of an illogical, dense bureaucratic machine. To others, in the era of the Great Depression, job relief was job relief.

The struggles for adequate distribution of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* arose from two sources; one had to do with business, and the other had to do with Roosevelt. Both were politically charged. The roots of these conflicts have been discussed above. On the first count, *Plow* was seen as a public threat to private enterprise. An editor for the *Motion Picture Herald* would mark this position with some rather inflammatory invective: “Vast outcry has been raised because the established motion picture industry has not seen fit to welcome governmental invasion of the screen. The pretext is unimportant, invasion is invasion.”¹⁰⁰ Lorentz had already encountered trouble with Hollywood when trying to access found footage to complete *The Plow That Broke the Plains*; this apparent conflict would follow the picture through its release. He had enough

98. “WPA Theatre Head Defends Salaries,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1936.

99. “New Dealers Enter Movies in Big Way Before Election,” *The Sun* (New York), June 5, 1936.

100. “Pinkish Tinges on the Screen,” *Motion Picture Herald*, July 11, 1936.

suspicions that he documented and asked others for any instances of difficulty in distributing the film because of Hollywood. There never appeared to be much of a smoking gun. Regional information adviser Paul Jordan replied to one of these requests with a succinct appraisal of the situation: "I know that you have in mind definite quotes from exhibitors refusing the Plow on the ground that Hollywood would not allow them to show it...[T]here is nothing in our correspondence record or from personal contact which could be safely quoted as refusal on those grounds."¹⁰¹ Lorentz himself described difficulties attaining success out of one of their offices in the Northeast in a retrospective memo. He noted a conspicuous experience with Warner-owned theatres in New Haven:

"The...chain's representative wanted to talk with his 'chief' before he decided to run it. He told my colleague...that the 'chief said to lay off that stuff.' Later when I saw him again, he said he couldn't play it. When I asked if he would care to give his reasons, he looked at me sort of queerly and said, very emphatically and knowingly, 'We can't play it, regardless.'"¹⁰²

This tone of unelaborated disinterest was a common encounter for RA advisers. Lorentz went on to write that the "real objection to the picture was subtly expressed, subtly shown. There was obvious a tacit understanding that theaters affiliated with big companies should lay off."¹⁰³ He may have been correct, but the motivations behind some systemic plot to keep the film out of mainstream theatres lack the corroborating evidence to make any hard assertions. In an article for the New York Times, Frank S.

101. Letter from Paul H. Jordan to Pare Lorentz, June 21, 1937, 2, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

102. Distribution memo from June 14, 1937, 2, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

103. *Ibid.*, 4.

Nugent may have most eloquently described the results of whatever this boycott was: “At least, there is one amusing aspect of the affair: it is the first time in history that Hollywood has censored a government. It is typical of the industry that it does the right thing at the wrong time.”¹⁰⁴ The reasons were shrouded, but the outcome was understood well enough.

But it would be unfair to proceed without considering a crucial question about the big five studios’ behavior: were their actions truly unjustified? An old rival institution, the American government, was holding out its hands with a film that had demonstrable profit potential, *and* was offering it virtually for free. They were also simultaneously claiming that it was of competitive cinematic quality with their own product. They had no incentive to bolster the reputation of what they perceived to be an adversarial ‘industry,’ nor utilize their distribution circuits to serve as a megaphone for national leadership, even though a partnership of this nature would develop once the United States had entered World War II. But that perception breaks down rapidly under the consideration that this ‘industry’ was an office that made one short movie for less than \$20,000, budget and manpower increments so tiny relative to Hollywood operations that it would seem comical for them to acknowledge it as a peer. On the other count, government film (even under Roosevelt) had made it into mainstream commercial spaces before without a significant public fracas. Snyder notes the screening of the Department of Commerce’s *Around the World in a Coffee Cup* at the Loew-MGM-owned Capitol Theatre a week

104. Frank S. Nugent, “Raw Deal for the New Deal,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1936, X3.

before *The Plow That Broke the Plains* debuted in New York City.¹⁰⁵ Now, here was a film with content that barely even related to the New Deal, and then not at all before 1936 was over.

What was certain, however, was that a certain kind of consternation about the film, one related to Franklin Roosevelt and New Deal politics, that was transparently an issue for not just mainstream exhibitors but many parties to which the Division of Information appealed. Paul Jordan had such an experience in Kansas at a program for a chain, the Independent Association, that operated in both that state and Missouri. This meeting of “about thirty-five” had Jordan requesting any of those interested in screening *The Plow That Broke the Plains* to attend a preview later that evening. Unexpectedly, his own appeal was preceded by “the Secretary of the Associated Industries of Kansas and he devoted a full fifteen minutes to lashing the New Deal for extravagance and spending and praising the Kansas Governor as the man who would make the best possible representative for theater people in Washington.” As a result, “one exhibitor from a town of 300 people” was the only person from this event to attend the preview.¹⁰⁶ 1936 was an election year, and there was enough fervor that these government distributors were facing partisan opposition.

It was clear the Division of Information was traversing a political minefield, and they were well aware they would not attain their goals by adhering to partisan interests.

105. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 38.

106. Letter from Paul H. Jordan to Arch Mercey, July 7, 1936, Box 42, Folder 1, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Dean Jennings, a regional information adviser, corresponded with an individual named Wimmer in Covington, Kentucky, who wanted to have “a single showing, sponsored by his pro-Roosevelt paper,” but he ultimately shied away from the negotiation.¹⁰⁷ They would do their endeavors no favors by confirming the suspicions of their critics and participating in a genuine propaganda campaign.

On the other side of the coin, the Resettlement Administration kept an eye on any organized effort to criticize the release of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. These kinds of attacks would be rather obvious in their partisanship, and rife with hyperbole. In what regional information adviser Paul Jordan would call “the worst article we have seen on the movie,”¹⁰⁸ an editorial in a South Dakota paper from just before Election Day would lead off by deeming the film “the most disgraceful, damnable, and disgruntled piece of propaganda ever produced by any government.”¹⁰⁹ Criticisms of government-sponsored work would never truly die down in the interwar period but this particular brand of invective, based on a perceived mythic betrayal of the true state of the lands in the Great Plains, was far less common than the words of those who proclaimed it truthful (enough).

It appears that the most concerted press effort against it came out of Amarillo, Texas, where multiple newspapers had at least ten articles decrying the picture as an example of wasteful and incompetent leadership by administrator Rexford Tugwell,

107. Report from Dean S. Jennings to Arch Mercey, 11 July 1936, 2, Box 43, Folder 5, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

108. Letter from Paul Jordan to Pare Lorentz, 19 November 1936, 1, Box 38, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

109. *Ibid.*, 2.

according to an office report.¹¹⁰ It was described frequently as both libel and propaganda from an administration based on the East coast trying to solve Midwest problems with which they were not well acquainted. In the same report, regional director L.H. Hauter noted the broad local reception to the picture after it screened, which was by no means conclusive but far less inflammatory than the press had implied, which was the most they could hope for.¹¹¹ The trick for the Division of Information in this divisive political climate was to float down the middle of the American ideological creek, making their aims of distribution, as well as the content of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, appear politically innocuous. However, in time, once the controversy had died down by the end of the year (no doubt aided by Tugwell's departure), they had no problem lending out prints of the film to politicians looking to appeal to their constituents for their campaign.¹¹² In addition, their press releases for *The Plow That Broke the Plains* featured as many praiseworthy quotes by American politicians about the film as they could gather, headed by Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, whom Denning determined to be the only statesman at the time who could be considered affiliated with the Popular Front.¹¹³

The Resettlement Administration had offices in many cities across the country, so after attaining good publicity from its dual premieres in Washington D.C. and New York City in March and May of 1936, respectively, they appealed to exhibitors right where

110. Report from L.H. Hauter to Rexford Tugwell, 1, Box 45, Folder 11, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

111. *Ibid.*, 2.

112. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 38.

113. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 10.

they could. Since the film's documented purpose (at least to justify it in the eyes of government bureaucracy) was to educate Resettlement Administration employees about the catastrophic agricultural situation in the Midwest, they first sought to find spaces to hold a screening for each regional office, of which there were 12, spread across the country.¹¹⁴ After that, regional information advisers would seek to appeal to any exhibitor (never excluding mainstream commercial chains from negotiation, though they never assented) as well as simultaneously make contact with local press organizations to attain the proper amount of publicity. They also distributed index cards to potential exhibitors for mailing into the department. These cards featured prompts for the name of the space, the owner, the top three preferred dates of exhibition, how many times a day the film would show, the address, and the kind of print needed (before the end of 1936 they had copies in both 16mm and 35mm).¹¹⁵ In time they had a slew of accompanying publicity materials like posters with critical praise for participating theatres the same as any standard film release would. They would charge nothing of any exhibition space short of shipping fees for the film print. There was no difference in procedure between commercial and institutional (their word for nontheatrical) bookings, short of any institutional screening having to wait three months after any local commercial exhibitions

114. "New Deal Screen Activity Scrutinized by Industry," *Motion Picture Herald*, July 18, 1936, 14.

115. Letter from Paul Jordan to Milton Frank, 20 March 1937, 2, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

had had a fair run.¹¹⁶ It was easy for the wheels to start spinning, but the Division of Information had firm hands on the steering wheel. In the coming months they would process hundreds of requests for prints of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. Between June and September, 1936, the film had showings in over 1600 spaces in 40 states.¹¹⁷

EXHIBITION OF *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS*

The film hardly needed an introduction for exhibitors or patrons in the United States, as it had been a national news item in the preceding months. The offices were already receiving letters from not just independent exhibitors but also from distributors looking to throw *The Plow That Broke the Plains* in front of features they were looking to sell. Even the President received such appeals that were eventually rerouted to the Division of Information desk.¹¹⁸ *The Plow That Broke the Plains*' reputation was substantial before many had even seen it, but it would need to be properly guided in the right direction. In May, in what would be a trend, publicity for its initial New York showing at the Rialto movie palace plugged it in similar manner to contemporaneous exploitation film as "The picture they dared us to show!" and a poster that said "Hollywood says thumbs-down!"¹¹⁹

In short, the controversy had given the film notoriety, and the potential for

116. RA Division of Information Distribution Meeting Minutes, July 1936, 2, Box 45, Folder 2, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

117. *Plow* Distribution Report, 29 September 1936, Box 43, Folder 5, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

118. Letter from Samuel Cummins to Franklin Roosevelt, 1 June 1936, 1, Box 45, Folder 11, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

119. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 46.

profitability from such a ‘scandal’ was not lost on savvy individuals trying to survive in a business environment utterly dominated by a few large companies. One of these individuals was Samuel Cummins, a notably prolific independent producer and distributor. He is also a prominent figure in Eric Schaefer’s exploitation film history *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*, a book which also demonstrates that the independent commercial networks to which the Resettlement Administration eventually had to appeal had been the domain of low-budget exploitation and foreign films for decades.¹²⁰ As seen through his attempt to distribute a controversially racy Czech film, *Ecstasy*, in late 1935, it is clear that Cummins was no stranger to the notion that an infamous film could be immensely profitable, nor that the MPPDA was probably the last beehive someone in the film industry would want to kick. The MPPDA transformed Cummins’ attempt to gain their seal of approval into an opportunity to make an example of what to them was a cinematic appeal to unconscionably salacious depths.¹²¹ Thus, it could not seem much of a surprise that he would attempt to take a film like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and maximize its commercial potential from its controversy. Cummins attempted to appeal directly to the president as early as June of 1936, less than a month after the film’s prominent and well-publicized premieres; in addition he wrote “I am, of course, a great believer in the New Deal, and for this reason I am very anxious to see this film is

120. Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 97-98.

121. *Ibid.*, 158.

properly distributed.”¹²² Upon corresponding directly with the Resettlement Administration’s offices, Cummins desired full control of the film’s distribution to ensure its financial success, but was also willing to manage merely a portion of it if they so allowed him.¹²³ What was present here is an ideological fusion akin to that of Pare Lorentz, one enchanted by Roosevelt’s unprecedented era of left-wing social expansion, but also appalled by the control and censorship coming from the companies that dominated his line of work. The cardinal difference was that Cummins was interested in making money, and Lorentz was far more invested in the film’s potential to cultivate an informed audience. Both aspirations were ultimately served by the partnership, which was a common example of many in the Resettlement Administration’s negotiations with independent commercial circuits and exhibition spaces, resulting in circulation that left few cities in the nation unexposed within a few years.

As much as it would appear as though the refusal of service of major theatre chains would be a disastrous prospect for an office aspiring to reach the public, there was, in fact, an already-bountiful and growing cinematic world of screens in the United States that did not fall under this purview. A research committee on social trends in 1933 determined that there were approximately 190,000 projection systems in use in the

122. Letter from Samuel Cummins to Franklin Roosevelt, 1 June 1936, 1, Box 45, Folder 11, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

123. Letter from Samuel Cummins to K. Clark, 1 June 1936, 1, Box 45, 1, Folder 11, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

United States in a noncommercial capacity.¹²⁴ It was up to Pare Lorentz and a slew of collaborators in the Division of Information to appeal to these specific interests that had so many different roots. They did so by specifically targeting these institutions and emphasizing different qualities of the film depending on whom they were corresponding with. The office was well aware of the diversity of spaces they were reaching out to.

Lorentz wrote in detailed field instructions:

To each type of organization the picture has a different appeal. To schools is shows the problem of the plains. To forums, it is the presentation of a problem in an arresting and entertaining form. To music groups it is the presentation of a documentary picture in which music plays a great part...To conservation groups the picture shows the destruction of the plains with their valuable grass cover and the rise of the dust storms. To museums, photography groups, art organizations, etc., the picture represents the first major effort on the part of the Federal Government in the field of the documentary picture.¹²⁵

These distinctions are practically minute, and yet there was a considerable difference of perspectives between them.

The first public screening of the picture at the Mayflower Hotel on May 10, 1936, was one such alternative institutional space, a series put on by the Museum of Modern Art's relatively new Film Library that had aims in challenging the movie-going status quo. It was a program billed on its elegantly styled invitation as "Documentary Films," and featured screenings of work from England, the Soviet Union, France, Germany, and,

124. *Recent Social Trends in the United States; Report of the President's Research Committee on Social Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1933), 210, <https://archive.org/details/recent-social-tren01unitrich>.

125. Field Instructions, 5, from the Pare Lorentz Papers, Box 44.

of course, the United States.¹²⁶ Will Hays used this program as an example of the dangers of propaganda and something for the Film Library to avoid in the contemporary cinematic landscape.¹²⁷

Founded in 1935 and spearheaded by Iris Barry, the Film Library was a key organization in the cultural reconsideration in the United States of film as art, something to be studied, analyzed, and reconceptualized, rather than just as an object of evening leisure. Haidee Wasson describes the spirit of the program quite elegantly: “From saloon sing-alongs to cocktail diversions, MoMA’s film programs wove together a variegated field of film practice. From desultory and debauched to the erudite and effete, old films crystallized a lasting form of cinema’s historicity, when old and new would coexist.”¹²⁸

In contrast to the Resettlement Administration’s Lorentz-driven adversarial perspective towards big Hollywood, Barry sought to position the project alongside major movie producers rather than against it. Wasson asserts “the Film Library argued *for* particular kinds of films rather than *against* commercial cinema. Its sense of moral or polite cinema had as much to do with engendering a manner of watching as with prescribing what should be watched.”¹²⁹ This allowed Barry to socially navigate the same fickle inner circle of Hollywood that Lorentz had no problem rejecting, albeit very

126. MOMA Invitation, 1936, Box 38, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

127. Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 140.

128. *Ibid.*, 176.

129. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

carefully. Before the industry would permit the library to archive and reassess their old pictures, they had a great deal of interest in ensuring none of their programs would harm their business or make them look bad publicly. It was a perennially tense alliance, no doubt strained by the fact that the Library was interested in proliferating practices of film production and exhibition that was specifically alternative to the prevailing mainstream system. Wasson writes, “[i]n addition to the more familiar idea that films might be *made* outside of the commercial industry, there was a concomitant call to recognize films might be *watched* in conditions removed from the confining imperatives of commercial theaters.”¹³⁰ The Washington D.C. screening was such a test in reimagining film spaces in America, and the results were a fantastic boon to the efforts of the Resettlement Administration to get *The Plow That Broke the Plains* distributed. A laudatory review from Fred Othman found its way onto the front page of twenty-one newspapers across the country.¹³¹ This unconventional screening had simultaneously identified the picture with a socio-cultural movement concerned with artistic reflection, marked it moreso than ever as the bane of mainstream commercial producers and distributors, and publicized it nationally in a manner that no one could prevent any longer.

And yet, on the former point, from an exhibition perspective, the Resettlement Administration ultimately outgained the Film Library’s socio-cultural reach, and in less time. By 1939 the Museum of Modern Art had their own alternative national film circuit that exhibited their programs originating in New York City. Wasson argues that the

130. Ibid., 15-16.

131. W.L. White, “Scribner’s Examines: Pare Lorentz,” *Scribner’s Magazine* 105, no. 1, January 1939, 9.

efforts of the Film Library flourished inside an elite, bourgeois public sphere interested in film experimentation and education.¹³² As one can see in Wasson's map of the circuit, its influence was predominantly bicoastal, representative of such a public sphere that lacks in American cultural universality.¹³³ In harshest terms, it appeared an indulgence of the privileged rather than a significant shift in 'American' thought across the entire nation. This helps to position the socio-cultural influence of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. In states located west of the Mississippi river and east of California, areas largely rural relative to urban centers on the coasts, the Film Library had hosted exhibitions 23 times. In less than a year of operation, the distribution of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, a film that would undeniably be referred to in elite cultural discourse as *film art*, reached almost double that number of institutional bookings in the same region. The Division of Information had superior reach, no doubt aided by government resources, which accessed a practically indefinable cultural sphere in the United States. These spaces and audiences were not merely the province of the wealthy or the well-educated elites of the United States; there was a notably more pervasive, more universal appeal that transcended class and regional boundaries.

Another cultural space that *The Plow That Broke the Plains* entered involved the prevailing American documentary tradition of the time, newsreel exclusive theatres. While such content had been quite successful for some time, especially since the United States' entry into World War I in 1917, the advent of sound technology and film made

132. Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 151.

133. *Ibid.*, 156.

the popularity of newsreel reliable enough that the late 1920s saw the rise of spaces and chains of such spaces tailored specifically for constantly up-to-date newsreel material.¹³⁴ Theatres like the Trans-Lux, opened in New York City in 1931, had no accountability to be exclusive to any one source like MGM-Hearst or Pathé, and as such could not only edit together master programs of the best material, but also change the featured content twice a week.¹³⁵ It was thus not a great booking burden to integrate something like *The Plow That Broke the Plains* into the program. In fact, Lorentz could not have completed the picture without integrating newsreel content, such as footage of World War I, into the film that his crew had shot. The complaint that the picture was “too long for a short and too short for a feature” was a common excuse that everyone working in the Division of Information had heard from theatre owners accountable to major production companies, but for newsreel exhibition spaces,¹³⁶ this would never be an issue. These theatres were immensely popular and lucrative, enabling an alternative exhibition style to persist amidst the dominance of classical Hollywood fictional entertainment. The WPA had had negotiations with Pathé in the past,¹³⁷ and the Resettlement Administration was able to make accommodations through similar channels.¹³⁸ The fate of newsreel and future government projects akin to Pare Lorentz’s dream of “films of merit” was similar, in that

134. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 143.

135. *Ibid.*, 146-7.

136. Letter from Paul H. Jordan to Pare Lorentz, 21 June 1937, Box 44, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

137. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film*, 12.

138. Letter from John Franklin Carter to Pare Lorentz, 11 December 1935, Box 41, Folder 1, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

the onset of World War II led to the appropriation of both forms to serve a rising military-industrial media apparatus. But for the time being, this work of nonfiction injected with dramatic verve was deemed a suitable counterpart to the newsreel style.

The mid 1930s saw something of a sea change for educational film, a broad term for nontheatrical pictures projected in classrooms and assemblies, and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, in perhaps its most interesting turn, became an example of the potential for new conceptions of media in such spaces. This network of projectors, expanded by the onset of the 16mm format in the 1920s, was flourishing in the 1930s with an amount of content that cannot entirely be recounted here. As Craig Kridel points out, “educational theory and school experimentation during this period was at a zenith as advances in progressive education were making their way into the classroom.”¹³⁹ By 1936 many of the bigger companies like Columbia and Fox had their own branches for producing this kind of content.¹⁴⁰ Once again, these chains of exhibition spaces were allowed to persist at the mercy of the Hollywood film industry, for they had little chance of establishing themselves as a rival commercial arena. In short, the venues were available, and *The Plow That Broke the Plains* hit the scene early on throughout colleges and, in time, channeled deep into networks of high school classrooms. From March to April in 1937, for example, prints were exhibited in 26 schools to student audiences in Los Angeles totaling 29,281 audience members, according to a Division of Information

139. Craig Kridel, “Educational Film Projects of the 1930s: Secrets of Success and the Human Relations Film Series,” in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, eds. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 215.

140. Wasson, *Museum Movies*, 51.

report.¹⁴¹ Presented with this documentary form, students in social science classrooms were experiencing a whole new kind of American history. College campuses also devoured the film voraciously; for example, Cornell University screened the film on two nights in February. The first showing entertained a crowd of 1000. The second one had 2300. In addition to sending prints of the film, schools would also receive accompanying guides for teachers and students full of accompanying information. It was divided into four sections of content that bridged several educational areas of interest: “The Documentary Film,” “How ‘The Plow’ Was Made,” “The Problem of the Great Plains,” and “Educational Use of the Film.” Also included at the end was a bibliography of relevant magazine articles and books about the environmental crisis.¹⁴² The film was also cited in numerous journals relating to film and education as a prime example of what a good educational work could look like. The discourse generally resembled the following example:

There is little doubt that if...*The Plow That Broke the Plains* with its timely theme of soil erosion could be shown to students and teachers in every high school in the land, it would plow across the old time-worn ruts of entrenched history instruction and cut new furrows in a curriculum field in which the seeds of vital, growing, useful problems of present-day life could be planted and developed...[the film] will challenge the intellect of high school and adult students as well as stimulate a constructive emotional appeal for its purposeful message of conservation.¹⁴³

Going into 1937, the Division of Information no longer had to do any work to get the

141. Los Angeles City Schools Circulation Report for *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Box 42, Folder 4, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

142. *The Plow That Broke the Plains* Study Guide, Box 44, Folder 8, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

143. Marien Evans, “Humanizing and Socializing Education Through Schools,” *Cinema Progress*, July 1936, 14, <http://archive.org/stream/cinemapro12amer#page/n55/mode/2up>.

word out about the film; now the requests were coming to them in force. Its value as an educational work was as potent as its more prominently understood status as a true, daring work of art. Whether big business in the commercial industry liked it or not, technological innovation was permitting an expansion of cinema networks and cultures beyond their meticulously crafted control; likeminded dreamers were making their own channels of communication.

And beyond even the purview of these spaces already discussed were the areas most vaguely traceable and yet so easily imagined in national consciousness as the American Popular Front. As has been explored earlier in this thesis, the Popular Front was a broad historical bloc formed by vast, interconnected networks of left-wing socio-political interest in the causes of international labor, populism, and anti-fascism.¹⁴⁴ In May of 1937, the Resettlement Administration, then re-christened the Farm Security Administration by New Deal reorganization, received a letter detailing reception in the wake of a given screening as they often did, this time from the Textile Workers Organizing Committee of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO was a central organization in the broader network of the Popular Front social movement, a coalition of unions “built by the children of the modernist migration, challenging the strikebreakers and private police of Ford, General Motors, US Steel, General Electric, and Westinghouse.”¹⁴⁵ The letter read “Your film...was enthusiastically received yesterday by an audience of 500 striking textile workers of the Firthcliffe Carpet Co.,

144. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 4.

145. *Ibid.*, 29.

New York.”¹⁴⁶ Along an institutional circuit in Pennsylvania proctored by the Debs League for Visual Education, prints of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* had showings for “large trade unions (clothing and hosiery) in conjunction with social affairs for their membership,” as well as at the “Carl Mackley Houses, a workers’ apartment.”¹⁴⁷ The same popular spirit that was uniting Communists and New Deal Democrats alike to further radical and innovative social agendas was broadly fostering a culture against the will of the Hollywood oligopoly that was willing to entertain new forms of cinematic experimentation and new environments in which to engage with and discuss them. The farmer, like the factory workers fighting for union protections, was a kindred profession. Urban activists valued this cultural artifact, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, much in the same way they did the photography coming out of the same office. It was a means to connect to a national imaginary beyond their sight, and to faraway regions of diverse, seemingly endless natural landscapes through the medium of social documentary.

CONCLUSION

Alas, examining these networks of interest, tangled amongst one another, complicated further by scholarly reliance on identifying and analyzing them through traces of the past, create a chaotic picture of the United States in the 1930s. But there is undoubtedly truth found in this somewhat ragged tapestry. Just what are these socio-cultural boundaries that accessed and appreciated *The Plow That Broke the Plains* in its

146. Letter from Textile Workers Organizing Committee of the C.I.O., Box 42, Folder 5, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

147. Letter from George Steele to M.E. Gilfond, 23 November 1936, Box 42, Folder 3, Pare Lorentz Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

early years of existence? In his theoretical reflections on the nature of alternative media, Chris Atton uses the term “alternative public sphere” that could potentially describe this unorthodox communication network of cooperation and discourse: “...[It] is an appropriate conceptual foundation from which to understand the production and reception of autonomously developed accounts of experience, critiques, information, and knowledge.”¹⁴⁸ He then cites Nancy Fraser’s suggestions for the efficacy of ‘subaltern counterpublics’ “to invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”¹⁴⁹ That is a suggestion that more than crystallizes the condition of this ‘movement,’ which acted against the aims of a hegemonic market system and negotiated with a state cultural apparatus with little power in this arena, that was interested in new and alternative ways of social thinking, education, and artistic expression for the sake of a country and a people on the ropes.

148. Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (Thousand Oaks: Sage University Press, Inc., 2002), 156.

149. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 123. Cited in *Ibid.*, 156.

Conclusion

The era of the state-endorsed social documentary experiment in America had begun, and would see more cultural success, but it was not long for this world. Lorentz's second film, *The River* (1938), received distribution from Paramount, a sign that the Division of Information's hard work to release their own picture had paid off. Hollywood's resistance had had the opposite of their intended outcome, and they were not about to generate another public controversy that emboldened government filmmaking's autonomy any further. It was a bigger critical and financial success than *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, garnering international praise, including winning an award for best documentary at the Venice International Cinema Exposition out of a field of 71 other films.¹⁵⁰ These successes culminated in the creation of the United States Film Service, and Lorentz was given the keys to the new car. For a few short years, Lorentz was able to not only work on funding his own creative endeavors but also employ other likeminded and well-regarded world-class artistic voices including Robert Flaherty, the documentary pioneer who directed *Nanook of the North* (1922), and Dutch radical leftist Joris Ivens, whose morally-minded, socialist documentary reflections on war spanned in content from the Spanish Civil War all the way to the United States' invasion of Vietnam and beyond. Ultimately, however, the Film Service fell prey to the kind of bureaucratic reprioritization of resources that these documentary projects had barely survived in the past. It had never technically had funds appropriated to it from Congress, a point of

150. "'The River' Receives Foreign Recognition," *National Board of Review Magazine* 13, no. 7 (October 1938), 20, <http://archive.org/stream/nationalboardofr1112nati#page/n463/mode/2up>.

consternation for many house representatives. A subcommittee formed by such individuals deemed its allocation of funds unlawful in March of 1940.¹⁵¹ By the end of June the agency's operations were at an end. This specific social documentary form was ultimately just a blip in American film history, though its influence on cinema would become apparent in time. When the United States would require documentary work after having entered World War II in 1941, the federal government, along with the military, appealed to and negotiated with Hollywood producers to create and distribute films.¹⁵² Whatever this alternative window was had closed. Independent documentary would not become palatable outside the underground in the United States again until, just like before, innovations in technology permitted the advent of direct cinema in the late 1950s.¹⁵³

This thesis has attempted to illuminate a history of an American era when economic catastrophe necessitated radical social ideas and programs to combat pervasive hunger and unemployment. Some of these programs were too unfounded in logic and made problems worse than when they started out, such as the actual function of the Resettlement Administration, in which American citizens were uprooted from their homes and relocated without enough regard for the social consequences of such actions.

151. Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 151.

152. *Ibid.*, 168.

153. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 237.

Others, like the Federal Theatre Project, employed tens of thousands of artists and provided thoughtful entertainment for audiences in the millions.

Somewhere in the middle dwelt the motion picture efforts of Pare Lorentz across its many names and agencies that had more muted and elusive social impacts. This project used Atton's typology of alternative media to validate a link between social movements that predated counterculture in the United States and more contemporary radical media industries, demonstrating that the innovations in the production, form and content of *The Plow That Broke the Plains* were the result of a constant tension between an unwavering state bureaucracy and socially radical actors. This project demonstrated that this tension was able to ultimately prevail in enacting counterhegemonic practices against a dominant corporate commercial cultural apparatus that controlled the cinemas of America. Then, two main points were determined through an analysis of the distribution practices, exhibition spaces, and socio-cultural networks that valued the film in a number of ways. First, government involvement in distributing *The Plow That Broke the Plains* was an essential power relation that allowed it to be seen in a variety of spaces and to diverse kinds of audiences in spite of rejection by a formidable commercial industry looking to ensure that cinema entertainment would not accommodate either public enterprise or the New Deal. Second, these spaces and audiences signified growing trends in the culture of film that valued the medium in fashions not born of the gatekeepers of the commercial cultural apparatus. Some of these trends included film as an educational tool, a work of art to be studied and scrutinized, and a social document. The American Popular Front historical bloc of the 1930s was varied in its socio-cultural

origins and consequences, and hopefully this study has done justice to the triumph its complexity. This ‘movement’ had its main ideological motivations but was never about just one issue or social conflict. The plight of the American farmer in the face of manmade environmental catastrophe was not directly analogous to that of workers fighting for unionization in factories, but they both came from abroad moral imploration by a sizable, diverse left-leaning portion of the American population at this time.

This is a plea that resonates in tone to this day. Christopher Nolan’s futuristic space-faring blockbuster, *Interstellar* (2014), features curious and recognizable aesthetic and moral allegiance to the struggles and interests of the American Popular Front. The first act of the film translates the historical context of the Dust Bowl into an amplified science fiction premise. Farmers in the future, as well as the remainder of the human race, face not the first manmade agricultural disaster, but the final one that will exterminate life on Earth. Dust storms exactly like those experienced on the Great Plains and featured in *The Plow That Broke the Plains* ravage the home of the film’s principal characters. This portion of the film even includes footage of interviews with real Dust Bowl survivors, gleaned from Ken Burns’ 2012 documentary *The Dust Bowl*, presented as fictional characters reflecting on their time enduring an apocalyptic future. These creative decisions make a lot of sense when considered as an emotional contemporary plea for environmental concern, linking American collective cultural memory of past conservation failures to the modern subtext of climate change as a defining social issue of our era.

This study was largely based on the personal files of Pare Lorentz, a fact that undeniably colored the narrative of this history. Lorentz's files were no doubt curated to his interests, which likely made the struggle against his adversaries on the West Coast appear more prevalent than they may have actually been; however, periodicals of the time make it clear that he was far from the only actor participating in this discourse. A future effort to elaborate on such matters would surely benefit from research of the official archives of the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration, cataloged without potential personal bias. As much as *The River* has received a substantial amount of academic attention, research on the films and production style of the United States Film Service is limited and ripe for future study. Another perspective that could contribute greatly would be further research into the activities of the MPPDA and their influence on film projects outside their control.

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