



Using FSA Documentary Films

The Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration funded two documentary films, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* about the creation of the Dust Bowl and *The River* about the importance of the Mississippi River. Both films, written and directed by Pare Lorentz, showed the effects of soil erosion, deforestation and flooding and the work of the FSA and other agencies. Both documentaries were selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." Lorentz himself referred to the films as "Films of Merit" and not documentaries. Students can watch one or both of the documentaries as a group and discuss their merit and how they compare to FSA photographs. Are there similarities between the documentaries and the photographs? Are their similarities in style and content between the two? How are they different? Is one medium more powerful than the other?

The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) shows what happened to the plains when uncontrolled agricultural farming led to the Dust Bowl. The film details the ecological causes for the natural disaster. It illustrates in an up-close and personal way the devastating effect that the misuse of the natural environment had on farmers and their families. Lorentz wanted to document natural history, as "grass and rivers have stories to tell." Despite not having any film credits, Lorentz was appointed to the Resettlement Administration as a film consultant. He was given \$6,000 to make the film. He got \$18 dollars a day, less than cameramen and paid some of the cost for the film out of his own pocket. It was the first film he made. The film was shot in five states: Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas and Texas. He wanted to buy stock footage from the studios, but they would not cooperate. The movie industry was not happy with his book, *Censored: The Private Life of the Movies*. But he eventually did get some stock film footage through King Vidor. He interviewed twelve composers for the film. Virgil Thomson was the only one willing to work for the money left in the budget. He incorporated tradition folk songs, hymns and popular music. The music works not only as a thematic backdrop, but is also a commentary in its own right. The score was recorded by the New York Philharmonic. On the day they were to record Lorentz was forced to stop the session at midnight, as he did not have enough money to pay the musicians beyond that time. The musicians decided to complete the recording for free. The script was not done until the shooting and score were completed. Thomas Chalmers, a former soloist with the Metropolitan Opera and the voice of *The March of Time*, did the narration. Lorentz did the editing because he did not have the money to hire both an editor and pay for a score. Since he believed the score was of greater importance, he decided to do the editing himself. Lorentz's script, combined with Thomas Chalmers's narration and Virgil

Thomson's score, made the movie powerful and moving. Lorentz concluded his film on an upbeat note, showing the efforts made by the Resettlement Administration to improve conditions for the farmers and to institute environmental reforms to prevent another Dust Bowl. It ended by stating that the Resettlement Administration was the people's hope and a depiction of its work relocating families. After the Resettlement Administration became the FSA the ending was dropped. It was the first film the U. S. government was planning to produce for commercial release and distribution. It was first shown at the White House in March 1936. Roosevelt considered sending the film to Congress as a Presidential Message. Its official showing was at the Mayflower Hotel on May 10, 1936, sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. Lorentz convinced the owner of the Rialto Theater in New York to show the film. Its positive public reaction opened the doors to other independent theaters and eventually played in 3000 cinemas. The major theater chains used the excuse that it was too short or too long. The film was taken out of circulation in 1939. The farmer used for the plowing scene is discussed in the book, *The Worst Hard Time*. The film was met with critical acclaim, but not by Hollywood. It was considered propaganda and not a documentary. Although one reviewer said "Voice, music and pictures made the rape of 400,000,000 acres more moving than the downfall of any Hollywood blonde." It was not welcomed by some Resettlement Administration field officers. One Texas regional office complained that the film depicted Texas as dry and windswept. Another Texas Resettlement Administration official suggested that wind erosion was only local and that the region is without rivers. Texas Congressmen protested and so did newspapers, calling it a "libel on the Southwest."

The River (1938) is another film made by Lorentz for the FSA. It shows the importance of the Mississippi River and celebrates the Tennessee Valley Authority. The TVA mitigated flooding, put a stop to the pillaging of forests and provided hydroelectric power. It details the history of the flood prone Mississippi River basin and how farming and timber practices had caused topsoil to be swept down the river. The film covers the efforts to control floods and conserve soil. Some of the scenes in the film have become clips in subsequent film and documentaries. While the film shows the way in which the River is misused, it is also a paean to the American landscape and mythos. He combined stunning visuals, a magnificent score and moving narration to show the necessity of the TVA. *The River* is considered Lorentz's greatest achievement. Supposedly it was inspired by a map that hung in the Secretary of Agriculture's office. It was filmed in fourteen states, with a larger crew and a budget two and half times the final size of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. *The River* was budgeted at \$50,000 and he delivered it just short of that amount. The shooting ratio for *The River* was 30 to 1. *The River* had 100,000 feet of film for a film that would be 3,000 feet long. He had planned to use stock footage of flooding, but instead used actual footage from the 1937 Ohio River flood. The WPA also made a documentary about the flood of 1937 in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. The title of that film is *Man Against the River*. The visual beauty of Lorentz's images is complemented by his free verse narration. He had been asked to do

an article for *McCall's* about the condition of the Mississippi River. He thought the article might be the basis for his next documentary. When the article was done, he thought it was too long, and spent a week writing a poem. Lorentz used Walt Whitman's style of repetition of place names in the poem. He sent both to *McCall's* allowing them to decide which one they preferred. They published the poem in May 1937 and received 150,000 requests for copies by readers. He decided to use it for the script. The script was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1938. Again, Thomas Chalmers did the narration and Virgil Thomson wrote the score. The score was highly praised for its beauty and creativity and the way it worked with the visuals. Aaron Copeland called it "a lesson on how to treat America." The score was originally recorded by the General Services Studio, but Lorentz and Thomson were unhappy with it. Lorentz found enough money to subcontract the recording to Samuel Goldwyn Studios, who agreed to do the recording at cost instead of a profit. It premiered in New Orleans on Oct. 29, 1937. Many newspapers gave it glowing reviews, although some critics still looked at it as government propaganda. The government made it available to theaters at no charge and it was picked up by Paramount Pictures. Unlike *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, it was a critical and commercial success, even with government agencies. It was nominated for an Academy Award and won the top prize in the "Best Documentary" category at the Venice Film Festival in 1938, beating out Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad*.