



1-1-1966

An Analysis of the Visual Portion of the U.S. Documentary Film The River

William Edward Fleming

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE VISUAL PORTION

OF THE U. S. DOCUMENTARY FILM

THE RIVER

by

William Edward Flesing

B.A. in Philosophy, University of North Dakota, 1960

B.S. in Speech, University of North Dakota, 1964

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

January

1966

236186



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This thesis submitted by William Edward Fleming in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Committee under whom the work has been done.

Donald W. Coffey
Chairman

Myron M. Curry
Joseph L. Smeall

Christopher J. Hamme
Dean of the Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all of the members of my committee, and to Prof. James Woolsey for his assistance as a consultant.

Special thanks are in order for Dr. Donald W. McCaffrey, chairman of the committee. Without his inspiration and ideas, this study would never have begun or been completed.

I would also like to express my appreciation to my typist, Mrs. Charles V. Lagge.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife and family.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

During the hey-day of the New Deal administration in the thirties, an attempt to inform the public about the Tennessee Valley Authority was made by the incumbent administration. It chose the documentary film medium as one way of doing this. A film was produced for the government under the title, The River, in 1937. It is still regarded as a classic in American documentary film production.

Purpose of the Study

This study is an analysis of the visual content of the film documentary, The River. The logic and clarity of the visual development presented in the film will be examined, and the relationship of the visual content to the central idea proposed by the film will be analyzed and discussed. Although principal emphasis will be placed on visual aspects, the use of sound effects and music seem so closely connected to the visual as to merit occasional references.

Justification of the Study

A number of critics and reviewers hold contrary opinions regarding the components of The River. In his text, Theory of Film, Kracauer says the film is "so vivid a pictorial narrative that only a minimum of speech would be needed to fill the few gaps left."¹

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, Theory of Film (New York: 1960), p. 119.

A. R. Fulton feels the pictures tell the story, while the literate and creative sound remains somewhat of an embellishment.² Ernest Lindgren seems to be supporting the same position by stating that the commentary is a little threadbare once the visual images are taken away.³

Mark Van Doren and V. F. Calverton, two critics who reviewed the film when it first appeared, do not give as much credence to the visual factor, or at least do not wish to give it anymore value than the accompanying narration and musical score. Van Doren says:

Any one of these things by itself would be incomplete, perhaps unintelligible; and any two of them without the third would still leave something to be desired.⁴

Calverton has said The River "cannot be separated from its contributory elements."⁵

Reviewers or critics, however, may view a film but once, or they may seek to relate the film to some central idea or associate it with some particular thesis. In Kracauer's case, he is attempting to establish an overall theory of film, to which The River is only incidental. What frequently results from such superficial treatment is a collection of general impressions.

²A. R. Fulton, Motion Pictures (Norman, Okla.: 1960), p. 200.

³Ernest Lindgren, The Art of the Film (New York: 1963), p. 144.

⁴Mark Van Doren, "The Poetry of Erosion," Nation, CXLV (October 30, 1937), p. 485.

⁵V. F. Calverton, "Cultural Barometer," Current History XLVIII (May, 1938), p. 46.

These writers tend to offer their comments and impressions, but attempt few more penetrating observations. However, criticism and accurate classification require more than impressions or a passing comment. Before The River may be critically understood, there is a need to arrive at some definite conclusions about the techniques employed by Lorentz, the film's director. A concentration on the film's visual nature is intended to provide a more substantial basis for that judgment.

Secondly, the documentary, as a genre, has largely been viewed in terms of its social function. This is the position taken by John Grierson and Paul Rotha. Both of these film-makers feel aesthetic factors should be secondary and incidental. The present study represents a new slant on approaching documentary, and The River in particular.

Finally, because of its reputation and high caliber, the efforts of Pare Lorentz in the documentary are deserving of scholarly work. To my knowledge, there is one doctoral study on Lorentz.⁶ This was concerned with his work for the United States Film Service. That study was primarily sociological and historical in nature. The present study is intended to broaden the understanding of the aesthetics in Lorentz' work.

Background Reading and a Basis for the Analysis

In order to evaluate this film, I have availed myself of much of the historical, critical, and theoretical materials concerning film, in

⁶Letter from Pare Lorentz, June 24, 1965.

particular, the documentary. The Liveliest Art by Arthur Knight, Documentary Film by Paul Rotha, and Grierson on Documentary edited by Forsyth Hardy were some of these texts. In reading these books, I have become aware of the lack of any major consideration of the visual portion of documentary film.

To assist the analysis, I have investigated concepts on basic film technique. Some of the important works of Spottiswoode, Arnheim, and Lindgren were examined. I have also read extensively in the recent Communication Art Books published by Hastings House. These would include, Technique of Documentary Film Production by Baddeley and Technique of Film Editing by Reisz.

The scenario which Pare Lorentz released was purchased and studied. I have also read the two books which Lorentz has written. One is a collection of newsreel photographs entitled, The Roosevelt Year. The other was The Private Life of the Movies, a book done on censorship. These books, while not strictly related to The River, did provide a broader understanding of the man responsible for the film.

A great deal of use was made of periodicals, especially those containing reviews or other critical comment on the film. Reference was made to two such reviews in the opening of this study. All of these books and reviews were especially helpful in gaining a perspective on the historical setting.

Obviously, the film itself provided the greatest amount of source material.

Definitions of Some Film Terminology

For the sake of clarity, a number of terms peculiar to the film and used in the analysis require definition. Most of the definitions

were taken from Spottiswoode's A Grammar of the Film. I have made reference to Nicoll's Film and Theatre and Lindgren's The Art of the Film in those instances where the language of A Grammar of the Film is unnecessarily complicated. Rather than interrupt the analysis, it would facilitate matters to define the terms now.

One of the most frequently used terms in the discussion of any film is "shot." A "shot" is the "picture of any piece of action taken in one complete whole by the camera."⁷ Five other terms relate to the way transitions are effected between one shot and another. The terms are:

"Cut"--A widely-used mode of transition involving the "instantaneous transference from any shot to its successor."⁸

"Dissolve"--When this shift occupies more time, to the degree that the first shot seems to disappear into the second shot, while the second shot replaces the first, the transition is called a "dissolve," or a "mix."⁹

"Wipe"--In the "wipe," the first shot is peeled off in some fashion, revealing the second as if it had lain beneath it.¹⁰ This device was overused in the thirties. Lorentz used it only once, and that is in the second episode.

"Fade-out"--"Fade-in"--These terms refer to a reduction or increase in light intensity. In The River they are used to mark the change from one episode or sequence to another.

The film also employs the laboratory device of superimposition. This is the printing of two different shots on the same negative.

⁷Allardyce Nicoll, Film and Theatre (New York: 1936), p. 42.

⁸Raymond Spottiswoode, A Grammar of the Film (Berkeley, Calif.: 1959), p. 44.

⁹Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰Ibid.

When projected on the screen, both shots can be distinguished.¹¹ Early in the third episode, there is excellent use put to the superimposition.

Any discussion of the visual structure of The River would involve the use of terms denoting the relationship between the position of the camera and the content it is photographing. The terms high-angle and low-angle designate the location of the camera either above or below the action. Panning the camera describes the camera's action as it pivots on the vertical axis while shooting.¹² Tilting means the camera "pivots on the horizontal axis normal to its optical axis."¹³ In the travel shot, the camera shoots while affixed to some moving object.

Lorentz makes less frequent use of the tilted shot and the tracking shot. In a tilted shot, the camera maintains a fixed slanted position. Near the end of the third episode, Lorentz uses the tracking shot. This shot is produced by moving the entire camera sidewise, forwards, or backwards.¹⁴

Procedure for the Study

The process of analysis required twenty-five viewings of the film, only four of which included audition of the soundtrack. This method was adopted to confine the analysis to the visual aspects in the film.

¹¹Lindgren, p. 239.

¹²Spottiswoode, p. 47.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Lindgren, p. 241.

To analyze the visual structure of the film, a scenario was prepared. The scenario was constructed from the viewing of the film on a hand-operated viewing machine, supplemented by viewings of the film on a 16mm projector. It consists of a shot-by-shot description of camera position, content, method of transition, and special effects, if any. Excerpts from the scenario will appear throughout the body of the analysis. Each shot has been numbered sequentially from the beginning of the film.

Abbreviated forms have been used to depict the distance the camera is from the content.¹⁵ The terms "right," "left," "upper," and "lower" frame refer to the frame as seen from the viewer's position.

The scenario thus derived does not completely coincide with the film's shooting scenario, owing to the changes frequently made in production and editing before a film is released. However, this kind of scenario is a more accurate account of the final print of a film. It is believed to be correct in its descriptions, and every effort has been made to insure its veracity.

The most meaningful analysis to be made seemed to be one which employed the successions of shots picturing one object or an aspect of one object. Any such succession of shots has been designated as an "object-unit." These "object-units" occurred with such frequency and regularity that they provided a sound basis for conclusions about the nature of the film as a whole.

¹⁵"ELS" refers to an extreme-long-shot. "MLS" refers to a medium-long-shot. "LS" is the long-shot. "MS" refers to a medium-shot. "CU" designates a close-up. "ECU" specifies the use of an extreme-close-up. The "ELS" and the "ECU" are used quite a bit in The River. Of course, these terms are relative in respect to the individual viewer, but this fact causes no real problem for analysis.

Sections exist in The River that are composed of a series of shots and "object-units"---introduced by a fade-up from black and terminated with a fade-out to black. I have classified these sections as "episodes" because they represent a collection of related events. There are eight of these episodes in the film.

These eight episodes combine to form the larger sequences. Sequence in this sense implies the arrangement of shots and episodes for thematic purposes.¹⁶ There are three sequences in the film. Because of the intentions Lorentz has with the three sequences, they may be labeled INVESTIGATION, PROBLEM, and SOLUTION.

The Evolution of The River

In order to better understand what Lorentz was creating in The River, some background information on the production is required.

The idea for The River originated with Lorentz¹⁷ reading the Report of the Mississippi Valley Commission, some blueprints constructed by the corps of army engineers, Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi, and Lyle Saxon's Father Mississippi.¹⁷ From this material, he apparently constructed the first of two shooting scenarios.¹⁸

When Lorentz saw the Mississippi, he discarded the scenario he had originally written.¹⁹ In an earlier article appearing in Scribner's Magazine, White said the river was basically unphotogenic for Lorentz¹⁹

¹⁶Nicoll, pp. 43, 44.

¹⁷Pare Lorentz, The River (New York: 1938), preface.

¹⁸W. L. White, "Pare Lorentz," Scribner's Magazine, CV (January, 1939), p. 11.

¹⁹Fulton, p. 196.

purposes.²⁰ After having seen the river, Lorentz "began to see that the story was not the River but its people, and what it had done for and to them."²¹ The results of the following account tend to support these comments.

The River was originally completed late in 1936, but the plans were changed when the great flood of 1936 hit the upper Mississippi Valley. Initially Lorentz had intended using newsreel clips of previous floods,²² but he and his cameramen were able to get into the flood area, so shooting was extended until early in 1937.²³ Lorentz then returned to New York with 80,000 feet of film and commenced to edit and attach the narration and music.

The idea for producing the flood episode in Lorentz's first plan is reminiscent of a comment he made about one of his publications, The Roosevelt Year. He put it into book form because he could not raise the money for a "skillfully edited compilation of newsreel material in narrative form."²⁴ Beyond his interest in newsreels, Lorentz seems to believe in the narrative potential of pictures. In the preface to that publication, he says a collection of pictures should be self-explanatory.²⁵ This is exactly what he attempted to accomplish in The River.

²⁰White, p. 11.

²¹Ibid.

²²J. P. McEvey, "Young Man With a Camera," Reader's Digest XXXVII (August, 1940), p. 74.

²³Time, L (November 8, 1937), p. 49. The author says Lorentz was there until Feb. 24. White says the crew was done in January.

²⁴"Lorentz, Pare," Current Biography, 1940, p. 519.

²⁵Pare Lorentz (ed.), The Roosevelt Year (New York: 1934), p. iii.

The film was first shown in the Strand Theatre in New Orleans, the first week of November, 1937. A sample of the kind of excitement which the film generated appears in this excerpt from a review in the New Republic:

The picture as propaganda doesn't even have to try, because whatever it started out to do it has tapped a national dramatic source that has more potential splendor and vital energy than any number of quaint covered wagons or 'births' of a nation.²⁶

Lorentz' first film, The Plow That Broke the Plains, had experienced distribution difficulties. Hollywood film-makers interpreted this as government competition.²⁷ However, Paramount's distribution centers picked up The River and made it available to theatre owners in thirty-eight cities. The International Cinema Exposition in Venice accorded the film a first prize in competition with more than seventy documentary films.²⁸

The following three chapters will be intensive descriptions and analysis of the visual segment of this film.

²⁶Otis Ferguson, "Old Man River," New Republic, LXXXVIII (November 10, 1937), pp. 17, 18.

²⁷"Federal Film Hit," Business Week, CDXLII (February 19, 1938), p. 36.

²⁸James Miller, "Unreeling History," Current History, L (May, 1939), p. 40.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RIVER'S INVESTIGATION SEQUENCE

The film opens with a lithograph of a great line of steamboats. Upon completion of the listing of credits, the first shot of the film appears. It is a superimposed shot of a short set of phrases on a map of the United States. The caption is "Prologue:"

This is the story of a river;---
A record of the Mississippi.
Where it comes from, where it goes;
What it has meant to us---
And what it has cost us.

The purpose of the film is given in an explicit form. The first four episodes, embracing one hundred forty-six shots, are explorations of the Mississippi and what the river has meant.

Episode One

This episode follows immediately upon the statement of prologue and poetically portrays the Mississippi River. This description, however, is not merely for the sake of description. It provides the setting upon which the film unfolds. The complete episode tends to install the viewer in a "certain setting favorable to the moral emotion which should arise from those things and places."¹

Because this episode has relatively few shots by comparison to other episodes, and because it is a key segment, an attempt will be made to describe the episode in more detail than some of the less important

¹Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, "The Fad of Naturalism," The Modern Tradition, ed. Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: 1965), p. 297.

episodes and portions of the film.

In the film, as in the drama and novel, events are understood in reference to the ways in which they are arranged. Regardless of how important the individual shot or incident is, it is best understood in context, in the light of what precedes or follows it. In the case of the four opening shots of the episode, there is nothing to precede and they have only themselves to succeed.

This first series of shots may be thought of as establishing shots. They "orient the audience in regard to location, time or circumstance of action."² The shots are all "ELS" of moving clouds and timber in the mountain country at the headwaters of the river. In this way, Lorentz prepares the viewer for the subsequent shots.

Once the geographical region has been established, Lorentz directs the viewer towards the river. The transition is composed in the following manner:

- 6 ELS Camera looking up. Clouds fill the frame. They are moving towards right frame.
- 7 LS High-angle shot of a body of water covered by a fairly thick mist. The mist is moving vertically in the frame from upper right to lower left frame.
- 8 ECU A small stream of water spilling over a few leaves and plants. The water is moving in a slight angle from left to right in the frame, due to the camera being tilted.

By diminishing the distance of the object, or content from the camera, and at the same time paralleling the clouds in shot six with the mist in shot seven, Lorentz is able to suggest a relationship between the

²Nomenclature Committee, "Terms Used in Production of 16mm Non-Theatrical Motion Pictures," Journal of University Film Producers Association, VII (Summer, 1955), p. 18.

clouds and the water. This matching was then reinforced by the content of the next shot, when the water becomes the primary object. This kind of transition, accomplished by the device of foreshadowing in the first shot, is one of the creative aspects of the film.

The next five shots are "CU" of the gradual growth of the rills and streamlets. Various vertical and diagonal patterns are created by the running water. With subsequent shots, the quantity and size of the water increases. Lorentz is visually re-creating the emergence of a river. This factor is enhanced by the rapidity of the shots in this section.

Sequencing these close-ups is a series of shots depicting the river's growth as it passes over falls and rapids, and meanders through woodland areas. In conjunction with the growth of the river, the camera is taking the shots with more protraction. There is a relationship being created then, between the size of the action and the distance the camera is from that action.

Up until this point, the camera has remained stationary. Once through the woodland unit, however, a series of ten travel shots is initiated. In this instance, the camera has probably been placed in a boat.

In this section, Lorentz films that portion of the river which crosses the low delta country. The first travel shot is a poetic picture of a placid bend in the river. The shot captures the contrast between the dark land, gray river, and light sky. Then the camera shifts to the sky and tree-line along the river.

Faced with the problem of continuing the visual development of the river, Lorentz was required to account for a rather lengthy portion

of the river which he may have considered photographically poor.³ To this point, he had been able to vary his shots well enough. Here though, he took three shots of similar content in a similar style.

Two of the three shots were difficult to link. One incorporated right-to-left travel shots of the river shore-line, showing both river and trees; the other presented an almost identical scene, but from a slightly different distance and angle. Ordinarily, a shot change is justified only by a measureable change in the camera position or the action. There was no reason to make the change here, especially when the first shot of this kind could just as well have been extended to get the same effect.

The last shot in the episode is an extreme-long-shot of an immense body of water. The horizon line in the middle of the frame appears to raise and lower, which suggests the shot was taken from a boat. With this final shot, both river and viewer arrive at the ocean. After a short time, the shot fades to black.

As the episode unfolds, the viewer is placed in the appropriate locale, both by the visual concentration on the river and the valley through which it travels. Most obviously present in this episode is the movement being generated visually.

Some kind of movement is essential to any cinematic production. As Arnheim has observed, "Motion being one of its outstanding properties, the film is required by aesthetic law to use and interpret motion."⁴ In places, more specifically in the early close-ups of the

³On p. 9 of the first chapter, reference was made to Lorentz's supposed reason for rejecting his first scenario. In terms of the remainder of the visual work in the film, this may account for the unnecessary cut between the two shots.

⁴Rudolf Arnheim, Film As Art (Los Angeles: 1958), p. 181.

birth of the river, the camera is interpreting the movement patterns of the content. Lorentz is visually re-creating in an imaginative fashion instances of what Grierson calls "movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth."⁵ At other times, the camera itself is being used to create the sense of movement, as exemplified by the travel shots. These factors infer the potentiality for moving both content and camera at the same time, a possibility Lorentz works to good advantage in subsequent episodes.

Secondly, the location of the camera in terms of the content contributes to a visual understanding. The clouds and mountains in the beginning are filmed in extreme-long-shots. As the river is being fed by the growing streams, the camera moves very close to the action. Once the river is formed, the camera gradually retreats to depict the continuous enlargement of the river, until it reaches the ocean. In this very simple fashion, the placement of the camera is seen to coincide with the progression of the river.

Thirdly, the importance of film editing is exemplified in this initial segment. The excellent transition from the clouds to the river is an editorial accomplishment, as well as photographic art. In the travel shots, the matching of two similar shots can be traced to the editing. Mixing the two shots does not detract from the overall effectiveness of the episode, however, nor invalidate the film's editing. Although not the primary subject of this study, editing is an instrumental factor in any kind of visual analysis.

⁵Forsyth Hardy (ed.), Grierson on Documentary (London: 1946) p. 80.

⁶Editing is simply the process by which the shots in any film are arranged. Shots are arranged in terms of content, visual pattern or movement.

Finally, the first episode is indicative of some of the techniques Lorentz was to employ in the remainder of the film. The content and aim of the first episode are relatively uncomplicated by comparison with the more difficult materials that follow. The remainder of the film will merit a more detailed and selective approach.

Episode Two

To continue with a detailed account of most of the shots in the film would be both superfluous and tedious. Beginning with this episode, only key shots or shot-groups will be cited which elucidate the visual narrative. The first such shot in this episode is the introductory shot:

33 MLS Low-angle shot, looking at the sky from behind a mound of flat earth. A team of two mules being guided by a man appears in right frame. The team is moving right to left through the center of the frame. As this team goes off left frame, another team enters the right frame and repeats the previous action. A third team appears in the right frame. It progresses into the picture as far as the body of the mules when the shot terminates. All of the figures crossing through the frame are in silhouette against the sky.

Beyond the black and white contrast achieved in the shot, there is the suggestion of endlessness in the actions. The lethargic gait of the mules and the men as they pass across the frame in this shot, and in subsequent shots of levee construction, succeeds in setting a tempo for the whole episode. The pace and circumstances are ironically reversed in the flood episode.

This episode contains perhaps the most effective transition which Lorentz was able to execute in the film. In order to grasp the significance of this transition for the visual narrative, three specific shots require a description and analysis:

37 MS Mule legs and flanks moving right to left in the frame. The mules are pulling a pan-like implement. The pan tips onto the ground, releasing the dirt it had contained. This tipping action is also fashioned in a right to left direction. The camera commences to follow the action at the point in which the pan is tipped. The angle for the shot is high.

41 MS High-angle shot of the pan tipping over again. The direction is right to left, and the camera follows the action.

42 CU Plow share digging a furrow, moving from left frame to right frame. Camera follows the action. The angle is high.

The progression of shots is interesting. Lorentz started filming earlier in the action in shot thirty-seven than in shot forty-one. Then, with the shot of the plow share, he made the transition to a new action. As the direction of the action was reversed, so the panning action of the camera was reversed. Through this technique of reversal, the shots call attention to themselves, thus enabling Lorentz to make a visual comment on the multiple uses of the soil, and effect a transition at the same time.

Within the following unit, which depicted the cotton being picked, Lorentz used the laboratory device known as a wipe. This particular wipe was a diagonal one, crossing the frame from upper left to lower right. It occurred between a high-angle shot of two men picking cotton from a row of plants. In the span of the wipe, the screen is usually split in some manner, but in this case, Lorentz did not use the visible dividing line. Instead, the first shot appeared to blend into the second. Since the purpose of the wipe is rather obscure,⁷ Lorentz may be challenged on his use of the technique. Regardless of the overuse

⁷Spottiswoode, pp. 253ff. Since the device is basically worthless to him, Spottiswoode would like to see it used as a simile, "a pictorial sign for 'like'" in the film.

of the device in the thirties, and subsequent disuse, it fails to communicate visually.

From the cotton fields, the viewer was taken to the loading of the cotton on steamboats, then finally, the boat's departure. In this unit, Lorentz managed to vary his shots between close-ups of parts of the boats, e.g., the whistles, the paddies, and long-shots of the boats and the loading. The thing communicated was the bustle and energy of the operations.

Some shots of the loading were interesting from the point of view of camera placement in respect to the visual activity:

50 LS High-angle shot of some men rolling cotton bales up the ramp of a steamboat.

61 MLS Similar high-angle shot, only much closer to the action.

62 MLS Low-angle shot of men rolling the bales down a ramp into a boat. The direction is towards lower left frame.

Here, by the juxtaposition of opposing angles, Lorentz is able to heighten the viewer's interest in following the visual developments. The camera films from above the activity as the men roll the bales up the ramp, then films below the bales being rolled down the ramp. This kind of progression has the effect of bringing the viewer into an intimacy with the action he is seeing. In the fourth episode, Lorentz shows the loading of the cotton in a different light. In the sixth episode, a more extended instance of imaginative camera placement occurs. All of these techniques manifest and contribute to the thesis Lorentz is propounding.

The remainder of the shots in this episode were devoted to the boat's departure. The final shot is a high-angle shot of turbulence which was created in the water by a steamboat under full power. The shot then fades to black.

This episode resembles the first episode in a few important respects. In both cases, there was a clearly distinguished visual progression from unit to unit. In the first episode, this progression took the form of simple segmentation, i.e., the formation and portrait of a river. In the second episode, there was a series of associations established in the graduation of the soil to the steamboats. The river and its adjacent area were the focal points in both episodes. The significance of the investigation of the levees, for instance, and the exposition of the river proper in the first episode are realized in the disaster of the fifth episode.

Episode Three

Save for the seventh episode, a short animated segment, this episode is the shortest one in the film. There are eleven shots all told. The structure of this particular episode and its inclusion in the film has been questioned by at least one critic.⁸ In order to answer this criticism and elicit the full meaning of the episode, a detailed analysis is required.

The episode is introduced by the shot of an inscription entitled, "Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia." As excerpts from Lee's Farewell Address roll vertically through the frame, flames are superimposed over the words. Finally, the words fade out and flames envelop the frame.

Next occurs a dissolve into a long-shot of wind-blown flames searing the countryside. In the midst of the frame is what appears to be the charred remains of a house. This shot dissolves into a shot of

⁸"The River," Saturday Review, XVII (April 9, 1938, p. 8. This criticism will be discussed in the following analysis.

a destroyed house, with only three brick chimneys standing. This is followed by three shots of homes which have been abandoned. During the shot of a fourth house, the camera tilts down, depicting some deeply eroded soil.

In the next shot, the camera pans over more bare and eroded land. This shot introduces the viewer to the last two shots. In the next to the last shot, the camera pans to follow an old wagon departing, laden with family belongings. Three or four people trail along after the wagon. The last shot is a tracking shot. The effect here is one of having the camera move bodily across the water.

The criticism from the Saturday Review was leveled at this episode and the final episode in the film. The reviewer wrote:

The introduction of the ruined Confederate mansions inspires an irrelevant emotion, for the bearing of the Civil War on soil erosion is a little hard to make out. Presumably we are to think of the unintelligent agriculture that supported King Cotton. But neither Uncle Billy Sherman's bummers nor Marse Robert's order of April 10, 1865, has any relation to that, and better symbols could have been found in Hinton Helper.⁹

Regarding this episode, the reviewer is incorrect on two counts. As the reviewer suggests, the burning land and Lee's dispatch are certainly symbols. However, in identifying the inflamed land with Sherman's march into Georgia, the reviewer is making unjustified inferences. The fire does not suggest this, nor does the commentary suggest it.

Neither is Lee's Address to be taken wholly in the context of the Civil War. Lorentz has condensed the address to give it a bearing on the pictorial images which follow (the burning land being one of them), not on the Civil War or soil erosion alone. The abandoned homes, the

⁹Ibid.

land, eroded and ill-used, and the uprooted people were to be identified with the "loss" and "useless sacrifice" in Lee's Address. Any "irrelevant emotion" in respect to soil erosion and improper agricultural planning is an interpolation on the part of the reviewer and not an error in the arrangement of the film.

Distortions of this kind can be traced to an unawareness of the visual synthesis which is operating in The River rather than any ambiguity in the film. This symbolic aspect to the arrangement of this episode becomes lucid in an examination of the sixth episode.

A depth to the visual synthesis was increased by the use of the tilt shot, i.e., to get from the abandoned homes to the depleted soil. Instead of creating a dissonance or an estrangement between the two units, which might have been created by the simple cut, the tilt intimates an association. In the sixth episode, Lorentz uses another tilt, only in that instance, the camera tilts from the soil to the house.

The purpose for the tracking shot at the end is somewhat vague. It does seem to indicate some kind of movement across the river, referring to the family departing on the wagon. In terminating each of the first three episodes with some shot of a body of water, Lorentz has created a pattern which he obeyed throughout the remainder of the film. The effect not only brings the viewer back to the association with the river, but it also creates a proportion to each episode, and through the episode to the total film.

Episode Four

At this point, Lorentz broadens the scope of his investigation to include the mechanization of the valley. From the forests north of the river's head-waters, down the river to the Gulf of Mexico, the areas

are alive with the rhythms of industry. To express this rhythmic industrialization, the episodes commence with a good depiction of lumbering in the northern mountains. From the trees, the film shifts to the steel mills and plants further down the river. Then finally, cotton and other products of the valley are loaded aboard ocean freighters. The significance of the respective units and the manner in which the units are integrated into the episode warrant special attention.

The most fully developed unit in the episode is the first unit on the trees. After two extreme-long-shots of the timberland to establish locale, the next twenty-six shots are devoted to the felling of the trees and the procession of cut timber on its way to the river and the sawmills. Within this unit, Lorentz employs an interesting technique:

- 86 LS Low-angle shot of some high trees. Camera tilts down slightly to trace one tree's fall. Movement is left to right.
- 87 LS Low-angle shot of trees. One tree is falling through the rest, upper right frame to lower left frame.
- 88 LS Low-angle shot of trees. One tree is falling left to right behind two other trees. Camera follows the fall.
- 89 ELS Normal-angle shot of a woodland river. There are trees bordering the side opposite the camera. One large tree falls left to right from the bank into the river. The tree registers with a noticeable crash in the water.

Although the camera is quite a distance from the trees, the moving objects appear to cross the visual field rapidly. The way this falling appears in the frame is determined by the visual technique.

Referring to this technique in general, Arnheim says that camera placement influences the movement "not only because speed depends upon distance but also because perspective foreshortening will diminish the

path of the movement, that is, increase visual speed."¹⁰ With such imaginative shot juxtaposition, Lorentz suggests the occurrence of a hasty deforestation.

The last shot completes the falling and introduces the next aspect of the unit. The falling tree is matched by the logs running down the chute. The transition is reminiscent of one between the clouds and the river in the first episode.

Immediately following the running of the logs, the camera pans over the logs stacked and jammed near a logging site, visualizing for the viewer the immensity of the logging operation. Even though the purpose of this unit does not become clear until the next unit, the progression of events remains one of the most lucid in the film.

Between the unit on the trees and the factory unit which succeeds it, Lorentz introduces a unique transitional device. Previous to this instance, the transitions were made either by the simple cinematic devices of cuts, dissolves, fades, etc., or by foreshadowing the following unit somehow in the first. At this point, Lorentz introduces the shot of a rising column of smoke which precedes the pictorialization of the steel mills. The shot would remain obscure were it not for the recurrence of a similar shot at the end of the factory unit. Lorentz has apparently created what might be termed a transitional symbol, which enables him to arrange and link the lumber, steel, and cotton units into a kind of orchestration.

Outside the factories, cranes are busy gathering the coal. Smoke is billowing from stacks high above the mills. Inside the factories, the molten steel is being poured from molds. These molten blasts of

¹⁰ Arnheim, p. 186.

heat and light silhouette the interiors of the mills through a succession of interesting black and white contrasts. All of this activity is visually exciting, and on that basis the inclusion of the unit in the film is warranted. Once however, Lorentz gets into a presentation of the problems in the valley, the unit's relevancy to the visual theme may be questioned.

In the cotton loading, Lorentz repeats an activity which he had filmed in the second episode, however, the differences are noteworthy. In the fourth episode, the cotton is being loaded aboard the ships by conveyor belts and cranes. The rhythms created by the loading processes extend the orchestration factor, and at the same time allow Lorentz to make an historical comment on the change in processes. The cotton is being stowed on ocean freighters, which also re-enforces the historical parallelism.

Once the freighters have been loaded, a short unit of six shots portraying some city-scapes along the river is interjected. Then the episode concludes with a few shots of a large freighter turning about a lighthouse on its way to the sea.

On first reaction, the introduction of the cities would appear to be irrelevant. In narration at this point, the cities are named: Minneapolis, Cincinnati, St. Louis, New Orleans, etc. What the cities are in name is unimportant to the visual narrative which is being formed throughout these first four episodes. The manner in which they are filmed, i. e., from positions which displayed their proximity to the river, is the factor most pertinent to the visual investigation.

This episode was structured very much like the first, in the sense

of initiating the visual statement high in the forests above the river and developing to the sea. There was a duplication in rhythm, as well, with the flux of the river being paralleled by the flow of industrial activity. The coming of mechanization to the valley is seen to have wrought changes in the valley. This is suggested by the differences in loading and shipping the cotton.

Through a concentration on the object-units, or aspects of the units, the transitions and parallelisms were discovered. These devices unified the individual episodes themselves and tied the various episodes together.

With the termination of this episode, Lorentz concludes the visual investigation of the river and valley. The significance behind the matter and manner of presentation becomes visually obvious in the fifth and sixth episodes. These episodes are the subject of the next chapter, THE PROBLEM.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROBLEM SEQUENCE

After Lorentz made a filmic portrait of the Mississippi, its length and development, elements of its past, and the advent of industrialization in the valley, he constructed two episodes which may be designated as THE PROBLEM. One problem is the river itself and its periodic floods which devastate the valley. The second problem results from the river. It is foreshown in the fifth episode, then fully treated in the sixth. Lorentz has filmed the problems with a sensitivity and technique on a par with the preceding episodes.

Episode Five

The flood is the subject of the fifth episode. During the great flood of 1936, Lorentz was able to get into the actual flood area and do the filming.¹ The tonal qualities of some of the shots reveal the lack of adequate lighting facilities, since a number of shots appear quite a bit darker or lighter than the rest of the total film.

Floods may begin either by an abundance of rainfall or melting snow, or a combination. The feasibility and dramatic value in depicting melting snow negates its use. In 1936, the floods in the Mississippi Basin were caused by an excessive amount of rainfall in the upper basin, a factor Lorentz was able to employ to full advantage.²

¹Cited on p. 7 in this paper.

²White, p. 11.

For the third time, Lorentz commences an episode with extreme-long-shots of the mountains at the river's head-waters. Now however, the clouds are gray, gathering in an ominous fashion. The hills and ridges, silhouetted against the sky, are bare by comparison to similar shots in the first and fourth episodes. Like the first episode, the cloud shots merge into a heavy covering of mist. In this instance, the haze hovers the mountains rather than the water.

In a series of five shots, Lorentz presents the viewer with an uninterrupted picture of deforestation and wanton exploitation. In dissolving between the first three shots and panning the camera over the range of devastation, Lorentz is able to suggest the extent of the condition. In the fourth shot, one of the side of a hill, the camera was slanted to emphasize the height of the hill and the twisted shapes of the stumps. In the fifth shot, the camera tilts down, exposing the finger-like roots of the stumps. The transition from this scene of desolation is accomplished in the following manner:

158 LS Shot of a twisted tree in the right frame, with one extension reaching into the frame at the top. A small icicle protrudes vertically from the end of the extension. A longer icicle is seen right of the smaller one in the middle of the extension. The opening formed by the extension of the tree displays a rough and jagged hill in the background.

159 MCU Same opening and extension as in the previous shot. In the center of the frame is the longer icicle. The camera holds this view until a drop of water forms at the end of the icicle and falls.

Lorentz had been filming the exposed roots of the dead trees, then with these shots, he takes the viewer into an intimacy with the dripping icicle, effecting a transition from the roots of the trees to the rain and growth of the river which follows. As Lawson observes, close-ups

"force(s) the spectator into intimate contact with the screen images, which are cut together sufficiently rapidly to present new material to the mind as fast as it can grasp it."³ The intensive concentration on the drop of water makes the transition to the new material (the rain) almost a preclusion.

With the following series of shots, the rain has begun to fall. The shots are close-ups devoted to the small streams of water beginning to form on the hillsides. With subsequent shots, the water begins to run in larger quantities and with more force. The parallelism between this gradual buildup of the rainwater and the emergence of the river in the first episode is obvious, only here, the river will not remain within its banks. During this buildup, Lorentz interjects frequent shots of the loosening of the soil by the raging water, which adds additional support to the point of the land's inability to contain the water with the trees gone.

In the next series of shots, the flood continues to enlarge, but now the cities are brought into the picture. The camera captures cityscapes in the background of the swirling waters, and also goes into the cities to film the destruction being inflicted upon the buildings, the flooding of streets and highways, and the rising of the river above a trestle bridge. The cities in this episode remind the viewer of those cities pictorialized earlier in the fourth episode, with such proximity to the river. Considering the conditions under which these shots, and most of the shots of the increasing flood were attained, the angles and varied camera movement are meritorious.

³John Howard Lawson, Film: The Creative Process (New York: 1964), p. 107.

The shots of the raging flood-waters ripping the cities apart are, with the exception of a few normal-angle shots, all high-angle shots. The angle is never extremely high, but probably resulted from the cameramen having to do most of the filming from boats. Following the filming of the flood's devastation in the cities, the camera concentrates on the preparatory activities down river. With the new material, Lorentz makes an abrupt shift in camera position.

Down river, the vigilance begins. Looking up the side of a levee, Lorentz takes two shots of a man in silhouette, guarding for the rise of the river. The parallelism between this shot composition and the low-angle silhouette of the mules building the levees in the second episode is purposive. Now, the levees are being watched. Later developments prove the levees cannot accommodate the flooding water.

Still, the river continues to rise. The speed of this rise is measured in simple, yet dramatic fashion. Interjected between shots of lightning bursts are close-ups of figures gauging the depth of the river: 37'; 43'; 50'; 54'. The final figure of fifty-four feet occupies the whole frame in an extreme-close-up.

Sound effects merit some consideration in this unit on the rising water and the earlier one dealing with the water in the cities. The whine of a siren and whistle from a steamboat were introduced at the time the water began to appear in the cities and lasted through the cut to the levees. In the unit just cited, the sounds of lightning were matched with each burst on the screen. The musical score is also supporting this portion, as well. These effects certainly added a sense of excitement to the events, but the events themselves remain visually clear.

Sandbagging operations are in progress, re-enforced by the construction of flashboards on top of the levees. Periodically inter-

dispersed into the sandbagging operations are shots of the flood-waters. These shots serve to depict the ever-increasing intensity of the water, and at the same time, underscore the realization that the levees are not holding back the water. This conclusion may be generalized to such temporary efforts as flashboards, also.

To this point in the film, Lorentz has either consciously or unconsciously avoided any visual emphasis on the human element. The river and its locale occupied the first episode completely. People were first introduced in the second episode in various work capacities, i.e., building the levees, picking, baling, and loading cotton. In the third episode, Lorentz included the one shot of the family trailing after the wagon. In the fourth episode, a few loggers can be distinguished in one extreme-long-shot of the logging camp. Later in that fourth episode, the cotton was being moved to the conveyor belts by some men. All of these people were Negroes. This would be due perhaps to a heavy concentration of Negroes in the Southern work force and would not reflect any racial attitudes in the film.

The sandbagging marks the introduction of people of the white race. This group is composed of the army, coastguard, and other governmental agencies fighting the flood. However, in all of these instances, the people are not of primary importance. The next unit marks a shift, though, from the river to rescue activities and a new concern with people.

One shot is taken traveling with a boat in its efforts to reach a group of stranded people in the distance, then picturing the boat's return with a group of people aboard. In this unit, there are quite a few shots devoted to people being taken from boats and trains into ambulances and Red Cross stations. People have also been streaming

into the emergency centers on wagons, bringing their families and belongings. During these shots, the pictorial emphasis is on the old and the very young, capturing the aimless and forlorn facial expressions. One of the most moving of these shots is of a young girl feeding a baby from a bottle.

The final unit in the episode is a sort of recapitulation of the flood's devastation. The camera pans over semi-submerged barns and farmhouses. Lorentz dissolves between two shots of that kind, then dissolves into and through a group of three aerial shots of a large community totally inundated with the flood-waters. From the plane, the camera is able to pass over the city and above the mass of seemingly inert water. The flood has ceased, but now it stands quietly in the city. The extent of the damage is communicated to the viewer. The shot fades to black.

In this fifth episode, Lorentz makes the following points: One, because the trees have been shorn from the hillsides, there is nothing to hold the falling rain. He is thus able to comment on the earlier scenes of deforestation. The purpose for that unit in the fourth episode is clear. Secondly, the levees in the lowland country of the delta prove to be inadequate as flood control systems, even when supported by flashboards and the vigilance of the army and coastguard. They simply cannot contain the water on occasions such as this. This becomes a fundamental factor when the film moves to the construction of dams instead of levees in the SOLUTION SEQUENCE. Finally, as a result of these conditions, the people and the cities along the river suffer a great deal of hardship.

Although the flooding originated in the high country stripped of its forests and proceeded to develop in a fashion parallel to the

emergence of the river, Lorentz is apparently more interested in this episode in measuring the devastation of the flood in humanistic terms, i.e., the havoc it wrecks upon the people of the valley. The people being rescued from the advancing flood-waters are not any one kind of person. They are identified only as people forced from their homes, victims of the flood. These people then, mark the introduction of a new factor into the film. At the same time, and by consciously avoiding a human context to this point, Lorentz is able to give the people the added dimension by which the flood is truly measured.

In the next episode, Lorentz' concern returns to the soil, which was filmed to a minor degree in the third episode. Here again the soil is eroded and depleted. In the sixth episode, Lorentz attempts to build a case for identifying the condition of the soil with the condition of the poor farmers who till it. The organization of the third episode in the first sequence and the thematic use put to the human factor in the flood episode provide the clues for understanding such a relationship.

Episode Six

The parallelism in shots and structure which exists between the fifth episode, and the first, second, and fourth episodes of the first sequence, enables Lorentz to integrate the problem of the river. A similar kind of parallelism in a more concise fashion is to be found in the sixth episode and the third episode of the first sequence. This parallelism explicates the third episode, and in so doing, illuminates other aspects of the problem. In order to support this assertion, a detailed analysis of the technique involved will be attempted at this point.

It should be recalled that Lorentz introduced the third episode by a shot of passages from Lee's Farewell Address, while the Address was being consumed in flames. This was followed by a few shots of abandoned mansions and plantations, eroded soil, and a shot of a family departing with all of their belongings. As has been shown by previous analysis,⁴ the material was arranged in such a way as to establish a context for the viewer, namely that of the Civil War, then to have the viewer re-interpret the context symbolically, once the ensuing devastation was revealed. The difficulty is whether the viewer will identify these factors as symbols of the waste in the following shots.

Lorentz constructed the sixth episode in a like manner, organizing the shots of the soil and the people in terms of, and successive to the flood and the flood damage. However, here he was able to escape the ambiguity which may exist in the third episode.

In the earlier episode, the purpose and composition of the units are apparent only if the viewer recognizes the symbolic overtones of the Address and Civil War context; however, this same kind of recognition is not needed in the sixth episode. Lorentz's primary intentions are still symbolic because he intends to have the viewer identify the disaster of the flood with the depleted soil and impoverished farmers. The flood and the wake of the flood rely not only on a symbolic pictorialization, but also on a chronological relationship. One event logically implies the other, and the viewer can associate and accept this chronology.

To transfer the viewer from the wakes of the disasters to the soil, Lorentz produced a visual transition. In the third episode,

⁴The reader is referred to pp. 22ff in this study.

the camera tilted from a shot of an empty plantation to a view of a bank of eroded gullies near the house. A shot of a flock of birds encircling above acts as a shift from the flood damage to the eroded soil. The birds may possibly represent the sense of death felt in the wake of the flood, and the tone of death expressed in the waste of the soil. The meaning here is obscure. To portray the erosion, however, Lorentz uses the dissolve, camera panning, and tilts to synthesize the individual shots for the viewer.

The land is deeply wrinkled by the erosion. The soil is a sandy variety, bare of vegetation. In the midst of this wasteland, Lorentz tilts the camera from the soil to a dilapidated farmhouse. Although this shot shows a reversal in movement from a similar shot in the third episode, the purpose is the same, i.e., to posit the house and the erosion in a common geographical region. In organizing the more important units of this episode around the farmhouse (i.e., picking cotton and the nightly routine of the farming family), Lorentz expands upon the theme which was vague in the third episode, and magnified these units into some of the most convincing visual logic in the film.

After having pictured a large pile of cotton being stored in an opening at the rear of the farmhouse, Lorentz takes the viewer into the fields, where the significance of the cotton work is extracted by the marriage of pictorial composition and placement of the camera. All of the shots in this unit must be seen and understood as a group:

274 LS High-angle shot of the rows of a cotton field running diagonally, lower right frame to upper left frame. In the lower right frame, a worker appears with a sun hat, bent over at the back, moving up one of the center rows. Then, a second worker appears in the frame in the same manner, working the row above the first person. A third person appears in the lower center frame. That person does the same thing, only in a row below the first person. As

these people begin to work through the frame, long white sacks can be seen which extend from their backs. These sacks are used to hold the cotton. A fourth worker appears in a row above the other three, moving the same way. The people get to a point just beyond the center of the frame, when the shot ends.

275 MLS Profile shot of four people working through the rows of cotton. Farmhouse in the distance, right frame. The people are working right to left. Camera follows them. The people are bent in their work. The camera is in a position below normal eye level.

276 MS Low-angle shot. Branches of cotton plants in foreground. Woman with hat on leans down to pick the cotton balls from the plants. Her face is old and worn. The cotton is obviously small and not healthy.

277 MS Low-angle shot of old woman picking cotton in lower frame. She leans back while picking, so as to be visible in the frame. The woman is not the same woman as in the previous shot, but the features suggest the same thing.

278 MLS Profile shot of three people dragging long white sacks left to right through the rows of cotton. They are bent, engaged in picking the cotton. Camera pans with the action, left to right. Again, the camera is in a position below normal eye level.

280 MS/LS This shot begins as a high-angle shot of three of the white sacks. The camera tilts as three people begin to drag the bags away from the camera. As they get some distance, a fourth person becomes visible in the right frame. A farmhouse is in the distance, left frame. The shot ends as a below normal eye level LS.

No where in the film has Lorentz employed such a variety of camera positions and pictorial compositions in order to present one particular object-unit. In fact, the most striking thing about the whole unit is the interesting viewpoint from which the work is seen. This is especially true of the two shots which frame the unit and the two profile shots. Lorentz shows the debasement of the cotton workers by pictorial means---through effective angles and composition that emphasize their plight. The people are bent. With their bent bodies, they repeat the ritual of dragging the sacks through the rows of cotton.

They assume the shapes of crawling insects pulling heavy white appendages after them.

No less interesting are the two low-angle shots of the women. These shots are much more concerned with the facial features of the women, and with suggesting a relationship between the old, weather-beaten faces and the quality of the cotton they are picking. The bolls are small and unhealthy, a factor which has direct bearing on the condition of the soil and the economic condition of the cotton farmer. This economic intimation becomes the core of the subsequent unit, i.e., the evening routine of the family.

From the work in the fields, the film moves inside the farmhouse itself. Here, the human factor, introduced earlier in the flood, is powerfully re-instated. Pictorial emphasis is placed upon the expressions and dress of the family, the preparation of the meal, and the interior of the house. Most of these shots are highly emotional in connotation.

The dress is uniformly drab and soiled. There is a hint of individuality in the people according to expression. With the children, the expressions amount to resignation and passivity. In the face of the old woman, probably the grandmother, an anxiety can be discerned. This is most noticeable when the women prepare the children for the night's sleep. The woman's face is aged and worn far beyond her years, like the two women in the fields. As in the flood episode, some of the most powerful effects were accomplished by a concentration on the young child and the aged.

It is odd to find no masculine element in either the shots taken in the fields or the house. How significant of a factor this is is difficult to assess. Lorentz may have consciously avoided using any

men in the shots to elicit the emotional impact he desired.

The meal is a salt pork and gravy substance, which is hastily consumed. Once having eaten, the family prepares for bed. With a single continuous shot, Lorentz has the camera pan the interior of the house. When Lawson speaks of 'internal montage,'⁵ he may be referring to this particular kind of shot. The director elects to take an uninterrupted picture of the content by rotating the camera, rather than break the shot down into a couple of shots. Here the aim is to capture an uninterrupted picture of the interior for the viewer. The viewer sees the children being put to bed, one against the other, in the overcrowded kitchen. In a room just off the kitchen, more of the family gets ready for bed. The old grandmother rocks still another child to sleep in her lap in this same room. The rotation of the camera permits Lorentz to integrate all of these factors into one shot.

The kind of shots, and the arrangement given to this unit tells a sad and disheartening story. When underscored by a tempo of slow and sad music, the unit develops a great deal of emotional power. Like the music and sound effects which underscore the growing tempo of the flood, this musical element complements a moving visual portrait which is obvious in its own right.

The naturalness with which the people perform their activities before the camera makes it difficult to believe the events were staged. During the panning shot of the interior, one of the women hesitated in her movement in a way that made her actions seem contrived or directed. She waited perhaps a second too late before she pulled a cover over one

⁵Lawson, p. 183.

of the children. Of course, it needs to be recalled that "documentary work is concerned with presenting real life and most of the documentary producer's 'cast' are real people in their natural surroundings."⁶ Lorentz uses the people sparingly and does not go to dialogue, which could easily lead to artificiality when the ordinary person is in front of a camera.

The episode terminates with a couple of shots of the night and the river. The last shot is very similar to the last shot in the first episode of the film. This technique seems to serve the purpose of framing the visual arrangement to this point.

Through the conjunction of its various units, this episode is an economic and humane description of the condition of the soil and the poorer class of cotton farmer. The attempt is also made to equate visually the problem of the soil with the problem of the people. Both of these problems are identified with the flood in a structural manner similar to the third episode of the first sequence. This is an overt effort on the part of Lorentz to synthesize all manifestations of the problem into one all-inclusive, multi-dimensional problem. There were two reasons for doing this. In the first place, this relationship is quite frankly the thesis Lorentz is propounding. Secondly, by placing the problems in one large problem, he prepares the way for the solution he shall offer.

In general, the visual logic which Lorentz has erected to this point in the film has only one minor flaw. The exception would be in

⁶W. Hugh Baddeley, The Technique of Documentary Film Production (New York: 1964), p. 54.

the unit on the steel mills in the INVESTIGATION SEQUENCE. This weakness is discerned by an understanding of the relationship Lorentz has created between the visual structure of the film and the thesis.

Although the factory unit contributes to the rhythmical structure of the fourth episode, the unit was not reconsidered in any way during the problem episodes. There was the possibility for exploring the part coal and iron ore gathering has played in the depletion of the soil and creating flood potentials with such practices as strip mining. However, Lorentz did not elect to do so. Perhaps, he saw the issue of demineralization as somewhat of a closed book, for which a solution was not readily forthcoming. However, Lorentz concentrates on the devastation caused by the floods and poor land management. His intentions are not only to illuminate the problems, but to suggest a practical remedy. The solution becomes the subject of the final sequence of the film.

South Bond
SECTION FILE

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOLUTION SEQUENCE

The first episode in this sequence has some of the attributes of the peroration, and could be placed in the previous chapter, since in part, it is a summation of most of the points made in the earlier episodes. More truly, it is the introduction of the federal attempt to solve the problems and indicates the geographic location of an exemplary federal effort.

Episode Seven

The episode amounts to a series of animated shots, which may be delineated in the following manner:

208 MS Chart of the Mississippi River Valley. In white, the Mississippi, its tributaries, and the Great Lakes. All else is in black.

209 MS Same shot, with the names of the states in the basin superimposed on the map. Markings are formed at places on the map to indicate the existence of geographical factors. After a series of these animations, a light is faded up, which concentrates on the Valley, below the Ohio and Missouri Rivers. This light goes out and the shot is the same as 208. Then the whole frame fades to black, with the exception of the Tennessee River, which remains in white.

This kind of film animation was hailed as a new technique in its time.¹ The technique is striking, but as is the case with this kind of treatment, both visual and narrational means are needed. This marks a change in the film's approach to this point.

¹Calverton, p. 47.

In the episode, the viewer is given a statistical account of the destruction of the forests and the losses in soil as the result of flooding in the past. The narration identifies the solution with flood control in the lower basin, i.e., the delta country below the Ohio and Missouri Rivers. One such effort aimed at accomplishing this is the Tennessee Valley Project. The reason work was begun there was because the Tennessee River was one of the principle villains in flood times.

The way in which the episode is arranged is reminiscent of the academic lecture, replete with visual aids. It was apparently intended to be visually interesting, but inconclusive without the narration.

Episode Eight

The projects of the Tennessee Valley Authority become the subject of this final episode. Lorentz defended the inclusion of this episode in the film, although his reasons are not a matter of record.² He probably defended it because his filmwork promoted his belief in such worthy projects as the TVA. Regardless of his intentions, the concern in this study is with the visual production. Taking this into account, the episode marks a shift from the visual emphasis as a basis for telling the story or expressing the basic ideas, to a reliance upon the narration. In itself, this factor is not damaging, but the bluntness through which the shift is accomplished weakens the visual structure of the episode.

Reviewers, who, for the most part, are basically pleased with The River, have been highly critical of the last episode in the film. White, in Scribner's Magazine, writing on the matter of solutions for the pro-

²White, p. 11.

blems in both The Plow . . . and The River, says "the government's attempt to answer them seemed inadequate."³ Saturday Review, beyond finding some fault with the third episode, also attacked the ending of the film, because it was "direct propaganda for the TVA," a propaganda based on "highly debatable assertions."⁴ These reviews do not place the blame on the pictorialization, or visual arrangement of the film, but on the propaganda.

Propaganda may be upsetting when it merely presents views which are at variance with the thinking of the recipient. A closer look at this episode, however, may indicate other reasons for the negative effect apparently exerted by the substance of the episode.

The episode begins with a series of shots tracing the construction of a large dam. The emphasis is upon the immensity of the operation. To terminate the unit, Lorentz employs the following technique:

311 ELS High-angle shot of a dam nearing completion. The dam occupies the center and lower frame. The camera tilts slightly to follow the lifting of the crane.

312 ELS Shot 311 dissolves into a shot of the same dam, only it has been completed.

The effect was accomplished by a matched dissolve. The dissolve in this case is called matched, owing to a similarity in composition between the content of the two shots. With the dam now completed, Lorentz directs his attentions to the solution of those problems resulting from the foregoing situations.

From the dam, Lorentz shifts to three shots of a placid, woodland river area, then two shots of several long lines of men moving through

³Ibid.

⁴"The River," Saturday Review, p. 8.

the frame in a regimented fashion. These five shots act as a transition from the water, now under control, to the planting of saplings by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The young trees are being rooted in the eroded gullies and fields. Finally, there is one high-angle shot of a wooded valley, in which the camera tilts to properly display the heavy growth of forests on the side of the hill. Lorentz is making a parallel between the rebuilt forests and earlier shots in the PROBLEM SEQUENCE of the deforestation which occurred. The parallelism between the two shots is rather obscure, however.

In this shift from the dam to the reforestation, Lorentz has simply edited shots together haphazardly, in a manner unlike the foregoing transitions. The transition is confusing and dependent upon the narration, which directs the viewer to the replenishing projects. This transition only premonitions the discordant visualization which ensues.

The next thirteen shots show the land being farmed, houses being constructed, various kinds of contour farming taking place, and a large herd of cattle grazing in the fields. In short, at the halfway point in the episode, all of the problems raised by the investigation are resolved. The river is being controlled by dams such as the one in the film, erosion is being met by the planting of trees and contour farming, the forests are being replenished, and finally, the people are being resettled.

Lorentz was able to make the building of the dam visually exciting, using a dissolve, and moving the camera in pans and tilts. With these other shots, he simply interjected a series of shots on top of each other, merely showing some things being done. The object-unity of earlier episodes is replaced by one or two shots per activity without much regard

for synthesis or transition. Of course, the narration is providing the necessary information at this point, talking about the soil being tillable now, the housing projects, etc. After having put together a convincing visual statement in the first six episodes, Lorentz may have felt these solutions would have been self-evident. They are, in conjunction with the narration, but on a purely visual basis, they fail to evoke the desired response.

Halfway through the episode then, Lorentz has intimated the solutions. Instead of amplifying the solutions in terms of the problems, he introduces the factor of electrification. In terms of the thesis evolved in the film, electricity would seem to be irrelevant to the problem. The narration terms it an additional benefit to be realized from the harnessing of the river. Interestingly enough, Lorentz' use of strong visual logic reappears with the electrification unit.

In a series of rapid shots, depicting the action inside the dam in turning on the electrical power, the viewer gets the feeling of the energy being generated. Underscoring the visual at this point are music and sound effects, which assist in heightening the sense of energy and power.

Then the viewer is provided with the shot of the first stream of water rushing over the wall of the dam to generate the power. This shot marks a transition to a unit of shots on electrical highlines and conductors. These shots are of varying angles and distances. In the process of each variation, the viewer senses the vastness of the electrical network, even though the content is basically the same in every shot. This is the kind of strong visual synthesis Lorentz was able to

effect in the first six episodes of the film. As a result, the unit possesses a believability and validity which is largely lacking in the rest of the episode.

The last shot of the highlines is completed in a panning shot of the lines, tracing the lines back to the dam. In a series of twelve quickly occurring shots, the camera tracks from a broad panorama of the dam into a close-up of a broad cascade of water, rushing through one of the gates. This shot fades to black, then followed by THE END.

In the early construction of the dam, and especially in the electrification unit, there are some additional examples of the caliber of visual artistry of which Lorentz is capable. The manner in which the episode is framed (i.e., between the concept of a completed dam and the idea of rushing water under control and performing a service), indicates Lorentz' sense of visual symmetry. However, the fluid transitions and fully developed object-units which effected and contributed so much to the visual synthesis in previous episodes were missing in the last episode as a whole. As a consequence, the episode remained visually static, depending upon and resorting to the narration for explanation and understanding. Whether or not this visual condition was an influencing factor in the criticism attending this episode is an uncertainty. However, it provides a more legitimate basis by which a critic could evaluate the propaganda.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, SUMMARY, AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The visual portion of The River is composed in a clear-cut, logical fashion. The object-units serve as focal points for the visual study. These object-units are arranged and synthesized through such methods as parallelisms, visual transitions, and camera placement, into episodes and sequences which investigate and set forth the problems.

The Object-Unity

The larger sequences and episodes of the film are composed of successions of shots devoted to one object, or aspect of that object. For example, in the first episode, the river itself is a single unit. The land provides a focal point upon which the Civil War, the abandoned plantations, and the uprooted people are drawn in the third episode. On the other hand, Lorentz put together a series of aspects on the flood to project the immensity of that flood.

Through the organization of such units, the film comes to possess a logical arrangement or format, which resembles a body of concepts. Yet these concepts, or object-units, are not the essence of the visual logic. They are especially selected materials which require some kind of interpretation. As Pudovkin has said, every object on the screen is a dead object. When the object is presented as part of a synthesis of separate objects, it is endowed with filmic life.¹ One method adopted

¹V. I. Pudovkin, Film Technique and Film Acting, cited by J. L. Styan, The Elements of Drama (New York: 1963), p. 68.

by Lorentz to arrange and treat the objects is parallelism.

Parallelism

The broadest parallelism is the kind existing between complete episodes. There are two such cases in the film.

In three episodes (the first, fourth, and fifth), Lorentz initiates the visual action in the area at the beginning of the river. Then, he traces the action down the river, until a concluding statement is forthcoming at the river's end. In so doing, he makes much of the activities in the three episodes analagous to each other.

There is also a parallel between the third episode and the sixth episode. In both instances, the film commences with some scenes in the wake of a disaster, then relates this disaster to the soil, and finally casts a group of depressed people into a relationship with the soil. This kind of parallel work is intended to integrate the various problems into one multi-dimensional problem. Parallelism is also adopted by Lorentz for more specific use within the episodes.

Object-units are also paralleled. A case in point is the unit on the cities built near the river in conjunction with the exploitation of the valley. Later, they are inundated with the flood, which partially resulted from the exploitation.

Perhaps the best example of parallelism of this kind is in the frequent appearance of trees throughout the film. First seen in the initial episode at the headwaters of the river, they appear in subsequent shots bordering the river as it enlarges in the flat country. Lorentz also devotes an extensive unit to the cutting of the trees. These factors are ironically brought to account when the flood begins

in the deforested areas. Finally, in the SOLUTION SEQUENCE, the Civilian Conservation Corps is depicted replanting the countryside in an attempt to repair the land.

There is an historical aspect to this parallelism between units. This occurs in the second and fourth episodes. First, the cotton is rolled on board the boats by manual means. When next seen, this activity is being accomplished by conveyor belts and cranes. The steamboats, too, have been superceded by large ocean freighters. This kind of historical parallelism seems to be a comment on the growth of mechanization in the valley, and with it, an increase in the exploitation process.

Specific shots are paralleled for the purpose of comparing the opposing contexts. The parallelism between two tilted shots of heavy forests is not as prominent as it needs to be. One shot occurred in the fourth episode before the trees were cut. In the final episode, Lorentz places a similar shot after the Civilian Conservation Corps has replanted the trees. This effort remains a little obscure, however, because the repetition would not be noticed in one viewing of the film.

The best effort at paralleling individual shots occurs between the low-angle silhouette of work on the levees and the same kind of shot used to depict the vigil as the people await the flood. The point is clear. The levees will not hold the water. Something else is needed.

Lorentz employed another technique closely related to parallelism. It is a reversal in the action of the object and at the same time, reversing the camera direction from one shot to another. The particular instance appears in the second episode. First, the camera pans to

follow the dirt dumped on the levees, then the panning is reversed to follow a plow cutting the opposite direction into the topsoil for a row of cotton. So used, this technique indicates a duality in the use of the soil, directs attention to the action, and posits Lorentz' ability to effect a meaningful transition.

The Visual Transitions

The methods adopted by Lorentz to execute transitions within the film also contribute to the visual communication. Four methods were utilized as transitional devices in the film:

- (1) The standard transitional devices of the cinema.
- (2) Foreshadowing.
- (3) A transitional symbol.
- (4) Tilting or panning the camera.

The first kind of transition is simply the transference of one shot to another. These are the various laboratory devices including the cut, the dissolve, etc. They are the typical devices of any film. However, these devices, in and of themselves are purposeless. In order to be effective, Lorentz enriched the devices with a content orientation.

In various places in the film, Lorentz foreshadowed a transition. After having filmed a few long-shots of the clouds and mountains at the beginning of the film, he proceeded directly into the development of the river. The transition was accomplished by taking a shot of a heavy blanket of mist over a small body of water. In the process, the viewer makes the connection between the clouds and the start of a river.

The third method of transition was used wholly in the fourth, or exploitation episode. Lorentz elected to manufacture a visual symbol as a means of effecting a transition. Smoke, one of the most universal

signs of industrialization, acts as this symbol. It connects the lumbering, the steel mills, and the cotton shipping into an orchestration.

In two spots in the film, the movement of the camera connects two units together. From a shot of one of the old plantations in the third episode, Lorentz tilted down to the soil. In the sixth episode, the camera tilts up from a shot of the erosion to show an old farmhouse on the crest of the hill. In such a manner, Lorentz moves the viewer from one unit to another, and associates the two units. This camera action suggests another method by which the content is treated. This is camera placement.

Camera Placement

There were a number of places where the placement of the camera in respect to the action contributes to an understanding of the film. To capture the sense of the emergence of a river and a flood, Lorentz uses a series of close-ups. As both continue to expand, the camera is placed at successively greater distances.

The most significant example of this connection between camera position and content is found in the PROBLEM SEQUENCE. All of the shots dealing with the work in the cotton fields are characterized by a selective camera position. To better translate the baseness and degradation of the work, Lorentz films three of the shots from below a normal eye level. As the workers continue through the rows, so the camera traces the action from this same position. Taken in normal positions, these shots would lose much of their intended significance.

All of these factors contribute to the making of a strong visual synthesis. It should be recalled, however, that as Maurice Merleau-

Ponty has observed, a sound film is not a silent film simply embellished with words and sounds.² These elements are present and cannot be disregarded. The impact of the flood, as it builds in intensity, is enhanced by the sounds of the steamboat whistle and the siren. In the portrait of the share-cropping family, the conjunction of music and visual image is especially effective in suggesting the emotional framework of the events. Nevertheless, the visual action is intelligible enough in these cases. While the music, sound effects, and narration contribute to the total film, the visual aspects are so strong that they are largely independent of the other factors.

Contributions of the Study

An intense analysis of this sort has lent considerable support to Kracauer's concept that The River is a "vivid pictorial narrative." Other critics, like Van Doren and Calverton, who feel the three components of the film cannot be separated or lack a lucidity when separated, have failed to see the independence of the visual synthesis in the film.

In preparing to study this film, an "object-unity" was discerned. The awareness of such a condition in the film greatly assisted in understanding the visual aspects. The validity of this approach for the fictional film is an uncertainty at the writing of this study. However, it should prove helpful in future work in the documentary, informational, or industrial film.

Such techniques as "object-unity," parallelism, visual transition, etc., show that Lorentz not only intended to develop a central idea in the film, but was able to add aesthetic dimensions as well. In the

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sense and Non-Sense, trans. by H. L. and P. A. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: 1964), p. 55.

case of The River, the aesthetics play a major role in the communication of the central idea, or theme of the film. These aesthetic factors have been clearly downplayed by Grierson and Rotha in their concern with the social theme of the documentary film.

Thirdly, a concentration on the visual segment intimates some areas for further study of The River. The musical score and the narration are obvious choices for examination. The editing procedure and the specific composition of shots, which were periodically cited in this study, would offer rewards for students with these inclinations. Such specific areas as the motifs of clouds and smoke, the use of angle shots, the relationship between the content being filmed and the length of shots, etc., would demand more detailed study.

It is hoped that this study has made one important contribution to the study of the documentary --- the development of a methodology for investigating this film genre. Others might learn new aspects of analyzing this vital form of cinema by employing this system.

APPENDIX

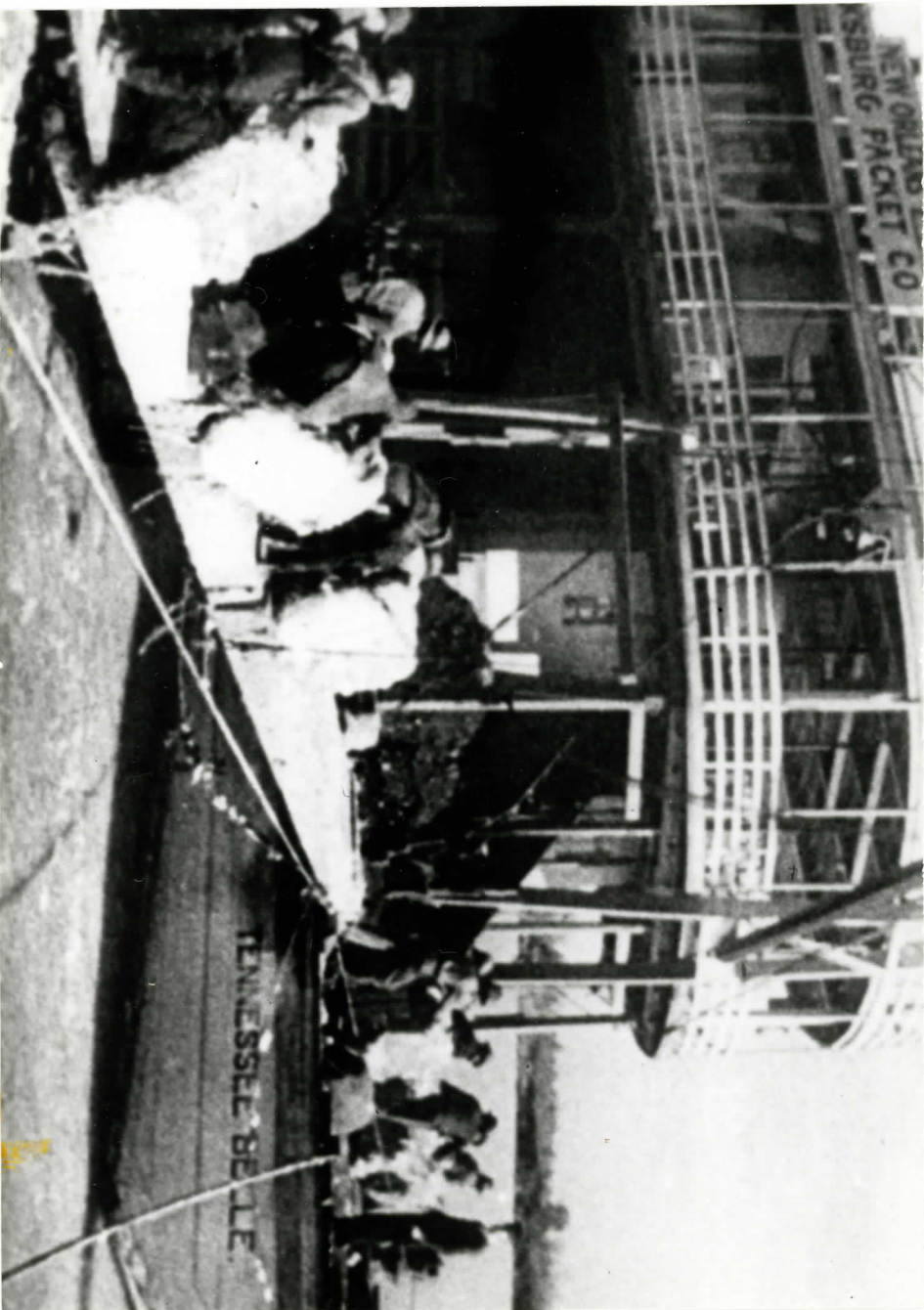
25th Edition
New York Point

This is a frame from the silhouette shot that opens Episode Two. The mules and men are building a levee. Compare this shot with the one on the following page.



In this shot, taken during the rising of the flood, Lorentz uses a similar angle and a silhouette to effect a comparison with the shot on the preceding page. In this case, the levees will not contain the water.





This shot appears in Episode Two. Compare the activities with the one on the following page.

In Episode Four, automation has come to the cotton industry in the valley, and with it, an increase in exploitation.



This particular shot occurred in Episode
Four. It is an example of Lorentz's use
of smoke to effect a transition.



This is a close-up of icicles suspended from an old tree limb. This shot occurred in the flood episode. It immediately preceded, and marked the transition into the close-ups of the rains commencing to fall.





This particular frame is taken from the unit on the cotton fields in Episode Six. It shows the position the camera was in to depict the action. The placement is below normal eye level.

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