

CINEMA AND THE CITY

**FILM AND URBAN SOCIETIES
IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**

**Edited by
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Postwar Urban Redevelopment, the British Film Industry, and *The Way We Live*

Leo Enticknap

Introduction

In August 1946 a controversial and highly publicized debate took place concerning the social and ethical responsibilities of the British film industry in a peacetime context. The immediate cause of this controversy was somewhat unexpected. That summer, C. A. Lejeune, the film critic of the *Observer*, had begun a campaign intended to draw attention to her belief that the Rank Organization, the largest and most economically dominant distribution outlet then operating in the UK, had decided to abandon the release of a "B"-feature documentary on the grounds that it was likely to prove a box-office failure.¹ The film in question was *The Way We Live* (Jill Craigie, 1946), a dramatized exposition of a town planner's proposal to rebuild the blitzed city center of Plymouth.

Unlike most examples of its genre from this period, *The Way We Live* was not a low-key educational film, produced with taxpayers' money or industrial sponsorship and destined to be shown in classrooms and church halls. It was made with a budget of £40,000 (over twice the average for a feature-length documentary in those days) by Two Cities, another Rank subsidiary which had acquired a reputation for expensive propaganda blockbusters, notably *In Which We Serve* (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942) and *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944).² The idea of a major, commercial film industry conglomerate producing a documentary about town planning was surprising at the time, and the film remains a unique project in the history of the Rank Organiza-

tion. More importantly, *The Way We Live* reveals a lot about the nature of and the extent to which the subject it dealt with had become an issue for widespread public debate. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine how the film articulates this debate, to place it in the context of certain important British fiction and nonfiction films dealing with similar issues and to consider whether its unusual (that is, commercial) provenance has any significant bearing on the ideas and arguments it offers.

To begin with, I examine the background to *The Way We Live* in the context of debates about planning during the 1930s and World War Two, and the ways in which they were examined in documentary cinema. I then examine the ideological arguments put forward by *The Way We Live* in the wider context of this background and of the film's industrial provenance, and argue that the film can be seen as the logical culmination of these debates and issues. In conclusion, I suggest that, in the light of the political and ideological issues raised by the film, *The Way We Live* offers a hitherto neglected insight into an important aspect of British politics and society as they affected attitudes toward urban regeneration at the end of World War Two.

Documentary Film and Town Planning

A surprising number of films dealing with urban planning were produced in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. Interestingly, none seems to have been made during the silent period and very few appeared from the 1950s onwards. Nicholas Pronay and Frances Thorpe's annotated catalogue of government films made during the war lists no less than fifty-four nonfiction films financed by the British taxpayer on this subject, which for Nicholas Bullock constitute "a remarkable testament to the vitality of the discussion and the hopes for reconstruction."³ Even that figure does not take into account any of the numerous films produced during the 1930s and after the war which address this issue, and non-government productions from the war period itself (for example, fiction films and commercial newsreels).

The idea of "planning" as a means of formulating policy for developing urban and rural communities initially came to prominence in the early 1930s, as did the British documentary film movement. These facts provide a possible reason for the absence of films about planning before this point, and are also connected in terms of the ideological agenda associated with both projects. The town planners and the documentary filmmakers were both motivated by public service imperatives, and as such argued for state intervention in activities that had traditionally been left to the private sector.

Although the Town and Country Planning Association was formed in the early years of the century and promoted a great deal of academic research on the subject, it was not until the 1930s that, in Paul Addison's words, "it

first began to influence Government policy in favor of planning the environment."⁴ There were two key developments which enabled this to happen. The first was the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act, which enabled local authorities to formulate systematic policies of land use in areas under their jurisdiction. While this approach was politically unprecedented, the planning movement believed that the legislation did not go far enough: two major drawbacks were that it was local rather than national in scope, and that the act's provisions were permissive only and did not enable authorities to overrule existing decisions.⁵ The second development was the appointment of a Royal Commission under Sir Montague Barlow, charged with investigating the "distribution of the industrial population," which heard a considerable amount of evidence from the Town and Country Planning Association. Although the immediate context of the report (published in 1940) was defense-related, Barlow recommended that central government should be responsible for planning land use on a national basis, thus boosting the political standing of the town planners.⁶ Both as a result of these recommendations and in the light of the realization that war damage would necessitate urban reconstruction on a huge scale, a further commission was set up in January 1941 "to advise, as a matter of urgency, what steps should be taken now or before the end of the War to prevent the work of reconstruction thereafter being prejudiced."⁷ The result was the Uthwatt Report, published in September 1942, which recommended that a central planning authority be established in order to oversee the postwar reconstruction program, and that it should have the right to compulsorily purchase land from private owners where necessary.⁸ Town planning, therefore, had gone from being an obscure area of academic research to a key element of government policy in the space of a decade.

The growth of the documentary film movement in Britain followed an almost identical trajectory. Although commercially produced newsreels were an established sector of the film industry since before World War One, it was not until 1928 that the Empire Marketing Board formed a film unit (renamed the GPO Film Unit in 1933 and the Crown Film Unit in 1940) intended to produce nonfiction films with a public service agenda.⁹ This provided the institutional base for the documentary movement (whose activists also made a small number of films through film industry and other private sponsorship) and its profile grew steadily during the 1930s. But before the outbreak of World War Two, the scope of government film production and the extent of its distribution were restricted by a lack of political impetus: it wasn't until the 1940s that the documentary movement was able to make its voice heard on a national scale and in films that were seen by a significant number of people. As Harry Watt, a prominent documentary director who subsequently established a career at Ealing Studios, recalled in his autobiography, "war was our bonus."¹⁰

One of the key players in the planning movement before the war was Leslie Patrick Abercrombie, Professor of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool from 1915 to 1935. Abercrombie was subsequently involved in the reconstruction of several blitzed cities – notably London, Coventry, and Plymouth – and also appeared in a number of films on the subject, including *The Way We Live*.¹¹ The self-styled leader of the documentary movement was John Grierson, an academic who had developed an interest in the reception of mainstream cinema during a period as a research student at the University of Chicago in the 1920s. Upon his return to the UK he campaigned for the establishment of a government film production unit, arguing that the cinema had a potential role to play in education and public information. This, he argued, could not be effectively realized if the medium were left to what he termed the “Woolworth intentions” of the commercial film industry.¹² Abercrombie and Grierson shared the common belief that public-service imperatives were ideologically preferable to private-sector ones, and that centralized policymaking could offset the negative effects of unregulated capitalism.

Given the parallel evolution of the urban planning and documentary film movements, it is hardly surprising that a number of notable documentaries were made about planning and urban regeneration during the 1930s, and still more during the war. Perhaps the best known from the prewar period is *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey, 1935), in which an inhabitant of an East London slum tenement describes the unhealthy conditions in her flat.¹³ The film condemned the legacy of late Victorian capitalism in creating substandard housing for the working class, and compared the case study in the opening sequence with the modern multistory housing developments which formed the linchpin of the London County Council’s slum clearance policy. Similar arguments can be found in other documentaries from the 1930s – notably *New Worlds for Old* (Paul Rotha and Frank Sainsbury, 1938) and *The City* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1939). These films tended to present the ideas of slum clearance and planning as the product of scientific research, a solution to social problems devised by superior intellects who had a moral right to impose their technologies on the population in pursuit of the greater good. Planners such as the council official in *Housing Problems* and Sir Charles Bressey (an architect and prominent member of the Town and Country Planning Association) in *The City* were shown as implementing “rational philosophy and the socially redeeming virtues of science and technology to cure the problems of society.”¹⁴

Interestingly, these ideas were also explored to some extent in British fiction films from the 1930s and the war period. In *The Tunnel* (Maurice Elvey, 1935), a visionary engineer argues in favor of tunneling across the Atlantic on the grounds that it would promote egalitarianism and international understanding, whilst *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1936) describes the reconstruction of a fictional postwar city by a technocratically-

led government: as Jeffrey Richards put it, the creation of “a de-individualized, scientific super-state.”¹⁵ In addition to fifty-four government documentaries, a small number of wartime fiction films addressed the issue, notably Basil Dearden’s adaptation of the J. B. Priestley play *They Came to a City* (1944), which was rashly described by a National Film Archive cataloguer as “the first attempt to carry out socialist propaganda in the British feature film.”¹⁶ This body of films tends to undermine Geoffrey Macnab’s assertion that “there was little evidence that enthusiasm for town planning extended to the cinema,” although it is worth noting that the bulk of this output was in nontheatrical shorts and Ministry of Information (MOI) monthly releases, not commercially distributed, feature-length productions.¹⁷

World War Two enhanced the political standing of the town planners and the documentary movement, as both groups found themselves assimilated into the apparatus of government at a much higher level than in the 1930s. As the institutional status of these groups underwent change, so did the arguments being put forward in films about planning. A far greater proportion of the public now found itself directly affected by national and international politics through activities such as Air Raid Protection duty, women working in munitions factories and, of course, compulsory national service. The Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA) held regular lectures and seminars on political issues (including town planning), and after the war it was blamed by the Conservatives for contributing to Labour’s landslide victory in the 1945 general election by “spreading socialism in the ranks.” As one Army officer observed, “in fifteen months in the ranks I never heard politics mentioned – but [now] the ABCA teaches them that something is wrong and that change is needed. They’ll vote Labour, though they couldn’t give you the names of three Labour politicians.”¹⁸

Following the winter of 1942, when the victory at El Alamein and the publication of the Uthwatt Report and the Beveridge Report (which proposed the establishment of the Welfare State) had shifted public attention toward peacetime and reconstruction, the notion of planning captured the imagination of the population and of filmmakers on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The radical press, led by the *Daily Mirror* and the *Picture Post*, continued to explore the idea in considerable depth, so much so that by the 1945 general election, planning had become an important element of Labour’s manifesto.

The Way We Live, the Planning Debate, and the British Film Industry

At first sight, *The Way We Live* seems an atypical example of the genre I have identified in the section above because it was not a product of the documen-

tary movement, but rather of the commercial film industry. As noted above, it was financed by the Rank Organization (then the UK's largest film industry conglomerate, which by the end of the war controlled a third of British cinemas and two-thirds of the UK's production, post-production, and distribution infrastructure) and produced on a relatively high budget by Two Cities, a company well known for high-profile propaganda epics such as *In Which We Serve* and *Henry V*. It is, therefore, rather surprising that the film was researched, written, and directed by a twenty-eight-year-old, Jill Craigie, whose only previous credit was for a three-reel short about Henry Moore and the Blitz (*Out of Chaos*, 1943). Interestingly, the release of *The Way We Live* precipitated a controversy over Rank's apparent reluctance to release the completed film, allegedly because J. Arthur Rank, the owner and chairman of the Rank Organization, feared it would prove unpopular at the box office. (One reviewer commented cynically that "it deals with town planning and is deficient in sex.")¹⁹ However, this issue falls beyond the scope of this chapter.²⁰

The film is effectively a dramatized exposition of the Watson–Abercrombie plan for the reconstruction of Plymouth following the Blitz, built around a narrative of a journalist (played by Peter Willes, a moderately well-known character actor of the period) visiting the derelict city to research a newspaper article.²¹ This character acts as a conduit through which Abercrombie and the non-professional cast (Plymouth citizens playing themselves) are introduced. A series of scenes describes the shortcomings of interwar housing estates, argues that the Blitz provided an opportunity to wipe the slate clean (literally, in many cases), and goes on to detail Abercrombie's proposals for rebuilding the city center and its outlying environs. *The Way We Live* adopts many of the conventions of a fictional narrative: in a prologue sequence, Willes is seen reading a Ministry of Information poster in Trafalgar Square which quotes King George VI declaring that "the time of destruction is ended, the era of reconstruction begins" and then noticing some books on town planning in a shop window. This prologue provides a clear cause-and-effect scenario, whose aim is to discover how town planning works and its relevance to the spectator. It is followed through by Craigie's casting of an allegedly typical Plymouth family (who were actually played by unrelated Plymouthians chosen through auditions and screen tests), and a series of scenes in which they are shown having to cope with overcrowded housing, derelict and vandalized residential areas, insufficient transport, and a lack of civic amenities.²²

As the film progresses, scenes illustrating domestic and social problems caused by what the film argues are unplanned interwar housing developments are followed by a description of Abercrombie's plan and a discussion of its likely reception by the people it will affect. A public meeting is shown in which Abercrombie details his proposals and invites responses from the

floor. Negative as well as positive reactions are shown: in a montage comprising brief responses from various sections of the community, landowners voice fears that they will lose out by having their property compulsorily purchased by the City Council, while an elderly shopkeeper points out that the City Fathers fought for a freehold system and that the imposition of ninety-nine-year leases on the business and fishing communities would be fundamentally undemocratic.

Set against this, the film repeatedly puts forward the argument that Abercrombie's plan can be seen as an expression of public opinion, emphasizing better living conditions, increased employment, and a revitalized local economy – in short, the creation of a land fit for heroes, but also objectives which the plan can realistically be expected to deliver. In the other major scene featuring Abercrombie, he is seen wandering about the Barbican (the street through the fishing wharves leading to the Mayflower Steps – the only area of central Plymouth left virtually intact after the bombing), pointing out the surviving landmarks. Stressing that his plan for the future must not abandon all links with the past, he assures viewers that those buildings will be retained, “but in the new plan we must not copy them.” There then follows a traveling matte sequence in which Abercrombie explains how the new will interact with the old, as architects' drawings are superimposed against the buildings behind him.²³ Scenes are also included of Lord Astor arguing for the plan in Parliament, and of Michael Foot (whom Craigie later married) campaigning in the 1945 general election on the strength of it.

The image of the town planner put forward in *The Way We Live* marks a profound change from that which is presented in 1930s films dealing with the subject. Before the war, planners were depicted as scientist-dictators who were justified in imposing the “de-individualized scientific super-state” of *Things to Come* on the population by virtue of their perceived ability to enhance society.²⁴ No one at the time, it would seem, seriously questioned the wisdom of their intentions. By the war and its immediate aftermath, the concept of planning had become related to popular opinion and the idea of effecting change according to democratic forces – hence scenes of Abercrombie taking questions at a public meeting and the emphasis on integrating continuity and change.

John R. Gold and Steven V. Ward read these scenes rather differently, noting that the Barbican sequence actually featured designs which Abercrombie had recycled from other projects, and arguing that the public meeting was really intended to convert the uneducated masses rather than generate any meaningful democratic debate, as an exercise in which “doubters are still heard and some of the audience remain confused, but the visionary emerges unbowed.”²⁵ Even if we accept this reading, it remains that the film as a whole was scripted around the idea of planning as an interactive process, driven primarily by the needs of the communities being planned for. A convincing demonstration of this can be found in the closing show, which

show a protest march of Plymouth citizens demanding that the plan be put into action.

The public image of plans and planners, therefore, had undergone considerable change during the war, as had the documentary film. Whereas during the 1930s it had been dominated by Grierson's beliefs, characterized by the fusion of propaganda, education, and the voice of an omnipotent government, the war had forced documentary filmmakers to acknowledge the preferences of cinemagoers, as defined by the commercial performance of films in the distribution and exhibition markets. Thus *The Way We Live*, drawing both on 1930s and wartime influences, offers a complex and intricate combination of the social and political issues involved in the planning debate, and aspects of mainstream cinema (the character development of Willes and the non-professional players, studio aesthetics such as 35mm cinematography and a full orchestral score) which had been found necessary if documentaries were to compete alongside fiction films. The effectiveness with which *The Way We Live*



Figure 19.1 The closing sequence of *The Way We Live* (Courtesy BFI Stills Library)

Live embodies this process of change, both in form and in content, indicates the extent to which the ideas dealt with by the film had come to be accepted by the public at large and the importance with which they were regarded.

Conclusion

Town planning had previously been the subject of a considerable number of films during the 1930s and the war, but, in contrast to *The Way We Live*, their motivation was primarily ideological and they were made primarily in the state sector. A likely reason for this is that the documentary movement and the planning movement shared a very similar background and objectives. *The Way We Live* was a product of the entertainment film industry, which can be seen in the subjective nature of its arguments. Rather than advocating the benefits of a planned society as objective scientific realities in the way that the 1930s planning films tended to, Craigie uses fictional characters to show how Abercrombie's proposals would improve the quality of life for Plymouth's inhabitants. This is not only consistent with *The Way We Live* having been made by a feature-film studio, but also with the social conditions of World War Two having democratized the notion and public image of planners and planning.

Nevertheless, the ideological reputation of the documentary movement seems to have weighed heavily on the film industry's preconceptions of what would and would not sell to the public, which in turn gave the Rank Organization cold feet when it came to the film's eventual release. Jill Craigie was clearly disillusioned by the experience of working with Rank, concluding that the short-term financial advantages were more than offset by the film industry's lack of commitment to documentaries. In December 1948 she asserted that "film producers who depend directly or indirectly on money from the big distribution organizations cannot be called independent."²⁶ However, the hybrid nature of *The Way We Live* (and the fact that it has been largely neglected by recent research) makes it a unique and valuable film for historians working fifty years after the event, throwing new light on the popular image of an important element of the postwar reconstruction program and on the work of a number of different elements in Britain's film industry and culture.

Notes

- 1 C. A. Lejeune, review of *The Way We Live*, in the *Observer*, 28 July 1946.
- 2 The *Daily Express*, in stories published on 9 July 1946 and 28 July 1946, gives the figure of £40,000; the trade publication *Kinematograph Weekly* estimates that the budget must have been nearer £60,000 (22 August 1946, p. 5).
- 3 Nicholas Pronay and Frances Thorpe, *British Official Films of the Second World War*

- (Oxford: Clio Press, 1980), *passim*; Nicholas Bullock, "Imagining the Postwar World: Architecture, Reconstruction and the British Documentary Film Movement," in François Penz and Maureen Thomas (eds.), *Cinema and Architecture* (London: BFI, 1998), p. 55.
- 4 Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994, 2nd ed.), p. 42.
 - 5 G. M. Young, *Country and Town: A Summary of the Scott and Uthwatt Reports* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1943), p. 89.
 - 6 Parliamentary Papers, 1939–40: *Report of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population* (1940), Cmd. 6153, para. 49, p. 204.
 - 7 Young, *Country and Town*, p. 86.
 - 8 Parliamentary Papers, 1942 3: *Report of the Committee on Compensation and Betterment* (1942), Cmd. 6386.
 - 9 For more on the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, see Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform* (London: Routledge, 1990).
 - 10 Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London: Elek, 1974), p. 186.
 - 11 For a discussion of Abercrombie's film appearances, see John R. Gold and Stephen V. Ward, "Of Plans and Planners: Documentary Film and the Challenge of the Urban Future, 1935–52," in David B. Clarke (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 73–7.
 - 12 H. Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Collins, 1946), p. 80.
 - 13 An indication of the film's enduring reputation can be found in a satirical adaptation, the animated short *Creature Comforts* (Nick Park, 1991) in which zoo animals complain about the uncomfortable conditions in their cages.
 - 14 Gold and Ward, "Of Plans and Planners," p. 66.
 - 15 Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 283.
 - 16 Quoted in Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Studio Vista, 1993, 2nd ed.), p. 195. For a comprehensive analysis of the fiction films dealing with reconstruction, see James Chapman, "Brave New World? The Projection of Peace Aims in the British Cinema, 1939–45," MA dissertation, University of East Anglia, 1992.
 - 17 Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 158.
 - 18 James Lansdale Hodson, *The Sea and the Land* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945), p. 349.
 - 19 Paul Holt, *Daily Express*, 26 July 1946.
 - 20 For a full discussion of this controversy, see Leo Enticknap, "The Non-Fiction Film in Britain, 1945–51," Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 1999, chapter 4.
 - 21 James Paton-Watson and Patrick Abercrombie, *A Plan for Plymouth* (Plymouth: Underhill, 1943).
 - 22 William MacQuitty states that Plymouth was not the original choice for the film's location: the initial idea came from Craigie and Sir Charles Reilly, based on his plan for Birkenhead, but Plymouth was eventually chosen after location scouting from a shortlist of cities, including Hull and Coventry. See William MacQuitty, *A Life to Remember* (London: Quartet, 1991), pp. 297–8.
 - 23 At the time *The Way We Live* was produced, this process, in which two or more shots are combined in a way that can take account of camera movements, was

a recently developed and costly optical effect; therefore, its use gives some indication of the budget expended on this film.

- 24 Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, p. 283.
- 25 Gold and Ward, "Of Plans and Planners," p. 76.
- 26 *The Star*, 29 December 1948, p. 6.