The New York World’s Fair of 1939-1940 gathered people from more than fifty countries on the remains of an ash heap in Flushing Meadows, Queens to glimpse “the city of tomorrow.” One of the most popular attractions was a 45-minute documentary commissioned by the American Institute of Planners and co-directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke: The City.¹ Conceived as a paean to the Institute’s favored planning form—the greenbelt town or garden city—the film consisted of four sections, each of which detailed a separate period of American history and its dominant urban form. Beginning with the bucolic ideal of the colonial village (Shirley, Massachusetts), the film chronicled the ills of the industrial revolution’s company town (Pittsburgh) and modernity’s metropolis (New York City) before locating the nation’s future salvation in the garden city (Greenbelt, Maryland). Garden cities are comprehensively planned, strictly-zoned communities in which population and construction are capped by an encircling agricultural belt. Within this belt, citizens are rendered self-sufficient by the neatly isolated array of industrial, commerce, leisure, and residential areas provided. The City argues that greenbelt towns are the true inheritors of the American colonial traditional and social order. Constructing them is therefore a “natural” expression of the national character, as well as a rejection of modernity’s ills in favor of a pastoral future-past.
From the moment of its release, *The City* gained a wide audience and influence. It served as publicity for the garden cities built through the New Deal Resettlement Act, featured in a *Passing Parade* newsreel (dir. John Nesbitt, 1943), and was dusted off to appeal for the construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway in 1964. Despite its popularity and influence, accounts of the film’s reception pose a curious paradox: if *The City* advocates for the garden city as the path to an American utopia and marshals the whole of the nation’s history in defense of this plan, why has no viewer ever wanted to live in the paradise the film attempts to regain? Canonic inquires into this problem regularly conclude that the fault lies in cinematic technique, that *The City* simply fails to adequately convey the beneficence of the garden city.²

By contrast, I argue that *The City’s* advocacy for greenbelt towns fails because the film depicts them accurately. *The City* clearly documents the flaws that exist at the heart of the garden city by producing an opposition between space as a concept and space as an experience.
In his discussion of the film, John Grierson said: “I remember a lot of lyrical up-bubbling life on those New York sidewalks ... Steiner and Van Dyke describe what they say is their road to heaven ... a Washington suburb—neat and clean and utterly antiseptic ... I do not believe they believe a word of it, and I have the proof of it the moment they shoot [New York]. Their cameras defeat their theories.”

Grierson claims this is due to the directors’ incorrect selection of material, but I argue that the New York section subverts the ideal of the garden city because it produces a radically different understanding of space than the rest of the film. Where Shirley, Pittsburgh, and Greenbelt all produce space as a concept, New York produces space as an experience. The clash of these definitions of space within the film speaks to the ways in which relations of production are composed in modernity. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not an empty container of social orders; instead, space produces these social orders. Modernity is dominated by abstract space, a state of affairs in which space as a concept (representations of space such as zoning laws or planner’s models) has completely dominated space as it is perceived (representational spaces such as monuments) and experienced (spatial practices such as daily itineraries).

Criticism of The City often focuses on the New York section as incongruent with the rest of the film, but explains this disjunction as a result of formal differences. For example, Thomas Benson and Martin Medhurst identify the New York section’s use of rapid montage and its generation of excitement in the viewer in opposition to the slower editing at play in the Shirley and Greenbelt sections, which fail to engage audience interest. Scott Macdonald and Keith Beattie have made similar comments, going so far as to argue that, while the rest of the film functions as a directive urban planning documentary, the New York section is in effect a stranded city symphony, dependent on that form’s concatenation of spatially diverse phenomena. In making this comparison, MacDonald and Beattie differ from the older opposition drawn by Grierson between The City—as well as other “directive social documentaries” of the 1930s—and the city symphonies of the 1920s. Grierson claimed that city symphonies explored “the world on one’s doorstep,” rejecting unfamiliar, distant locations as proper subjects for documentaries in favor of the daily reality encountered by a modern urban dweller. However, such films fail to disclose the labor conditions underpinning that reality, studying instead the fascinating play of surfaces and technology. They are therefore “the most dangerous of all film models to follow.” While he does not frame the opposition between city symphonies...
and directive films as a moral conflict, Bill Nichols reaffirms their difference, classing the former as poetic and the latter as expository documentaries.\(^8\)

Thus, the assertion that *The City* includes a city symphony is surprising. More important, Grierson, who described *The City* as “one of the first [American] directive social documentaries” and despised city symphonies, admired the New York section MacDonald and Beattie would later claim for the symphony tradition more than the rest of the film. The explanation for this crosspollination of documentary form and Grierson’s contradictory statements is that MacDonald and Beattie are correct in invoking the city symphony’s technique, but fail to mention that *The City* actually inverts its function. The New York section of the film involves rapid montage and depicts varied daily activities, focusing particularly on technologies associated with urban modernity. However, this resemblance encompasses only the city symphony’s subject, not its significance. City symphonies produce an image of the city as a unified organism with a circadian cycle. The films contain evolving themes and divergent rhythms that are resolved through the creation of a master structure. The viewer thereby gains an impossible, omniscient vantage conveying domination of the same urban environment that escapes or overpowers the observer in everyday life. City symphonies produce conceptual space.

The New York section of *The City* consistently subverts this very production. The schematic comparisons that help organize and narrate space in, for example, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (dir. Walter Ruttmann, 1928), are conspicuous in their absence.\(^9\) It is the other sections of the film that attempt to produce the space of a city symphony. Using the trope of a country’s history as a kind of “national day,” screenwriter Lewis Mumford situated the colonial era as morning, evoked an overcast afternoon for the industrial era, and positioned the garden city as a new glorious dawn. In doing so, Mumford attempted to not only reproduce the city symphony’s spatial mastery but also to extend its grasp to history. Mumford’s model transforms several contemporary but spatially disparate locations into a representation of a single space’s historical evolution. At the same time, Mumford reduced social orders comprised of space as it is conceived, perceived, and experienced to a series of decontextualized signs: Shirley, Pittsburgh, and Greenbelt are always made to stand for something other than themselves. Like the planner’s schematic they endorse, and in contrast to New York’s experiential space, they can only be conceptualized by a voyeur situated on their exterior, not experienced by a voyager through their interior.
The transformation of these areas into a single conceptual space is evident from *The City*'s first shots, which perform a brief visual analysis of a farm, finally settling on a plaque that reads “Sias Farm 1791.” At the same time the expository narration intones: “a century or two ago we began building cities to suit our needs.” In the first thirty seconds of the film, the contemporary community of Shirley is recast as the paradigmatic colonial New England village through a combination of voiceover and visual detail, even as “the city” is also redefined from an agent and form of modernity to a constitutive aspect of revolutionary era American identity. This landscape is traversed by a young boy whom the camera follows throughout, reinscribing the “dawn” of American history through both the time of day depicted and the age of the protagonist. The boy, however, seems to have nothing to do. He simply wanders, pacing on the top of a hill to better allow the camera to pan the full length of the town below. Rather than narrating an experience of space, the boy is simply the proxy author of space reduced to a concept and visual mastery.

First shot of Shirley Center, Massachusetts

If the dawn of the country registered in the youth of the boy who served as guide in Shirley, then its decline is evoked in the first shots of the Pittsburgh section, which center on a middle-aged steel worker. If the boy ascended the
rise of a pastoral hill clad in wheat, then the man descends a hellish slope built on the waste material of a steel mill—although he allows the camera an equally exterior view of the city. Rather than simply evoke the linear development of a single space or imagined community, the transition from Shirley to Pittsburgh is also a move out of America itself—or at least out of the “we the people” who are constructed by the voiceover in every other section. The narrator in this section, by contrast, consistently speaks of “you.” This vocal distance is accompanied by images of bodies the visual economy of the film constructs as “sick”—dirty children, obese women, disabled men, and the only people of color in the film. It is as though, in its efforts to quarantine the industrial era company town from the roster of viable urban forms, the film has exiled it to a dystopian alternate history.

Pittsburgh, however, maintains the conceit of a paradigmatic day as proportionate metaphor for American history. The next section, shot in New York, dispenses with the conceit entirely. In her recent critique of this section, Vojislava Filopcevic claims that its failure to depict the city’s skyline makes constructing a figure for collective citizenship impossible. By contrast, I argue that the eschewal of exterior views is precisely what produces New York as a series of spatial practices instead of a conceptual space. Shirley and Pittsburgh’s pseudo-skylines are integral to producing
them as unified images that have only a single meaning. The New York section instead begins with the camera at street level, enclosed by buildings, unable to see their tops. Instead of mastering space as a concept, the viewer is forced to occupy it as a practice, engulfed in a plurality of uses. This is evident in both the sound and image tracks. If Pittsburgh is inhabited by “you” and Shirley by “we,” then New York is the habitat of a series of boisterous “I”s. In this section, voice of god narration falls away and a plethora of voices with local accents and vocabulary invade the soundtrack, speaking their own needs, fears, desires, and competence. While the frantic editing attempts to represent a city out of control, the composition of the shots, the action within the frame, and the aural New York continually produce a sense of competence, an ease of negotiation and “up-bubbling life.”

The sense of spilling borders has consequences for the film’s overall structures. If the other sections are supposed to stand for the past and the future, then New York already has the distinction of depicting the present, of standing for itself. The mental space of “modernity” as a stop on the film’s conceptual itinerary from the pre-revolutionary pastoral to the garden city is subverted by the emergence of New York as social, experiential space with its own synchronic rhythm. The result is that the present cannot be successfully integrated into the film’s symphony of American history, but rather exists as an equal and mutually exclusive figuration of space outside this microcosm.

First shot of New York City
This rupture of historical-spatial narrative is heightened in the film’s final section, which seems to halt time all together. This is all the more surprising because, whereas the New York section purportedly depicts problems arising from the mixed use of spaces and the difficulty of moving from spaces of production to spaces of leisure, the voiceover in the Greenbelt section insists on the segregation of uses and the ease of navigation in which this will result. After the expected opening panoramic shot lays out the contours of Greenbelt, the slow yet disjointed pans used to convey this differentiation of spaces and the ease of movement between them contain vacation spots, laboratories, houses, and public buildings. It is impossible, however, to determine the spatial relations of one to the other, and shots of each reveal nearly identical backgrounds. The garden city comes to resemble a nightmarishly claustrophobic moebius strip in which schools look exactly like factories. By the end of the film, nature metaphors come to dominate both the voiceover and the visual track. As the narrator claims that “human beings need good food, light and space to grow,” shots of workers leaving factories dissolve to shots of trees, which mimic a point of view shot of leaves from the Shirley section. The citizens of Greenbelt are reduced to cash crops, and the film has become a loop.
The loop does not quite close, however, because *The City* not only narrates the historical march of progress through four spaces, but also produces two opposed ways of narrating space: as concept and experience. Architect and theorist Bernard Tschumi has articulated conceptual and experiential space to physical vantages afforded by the pyramid and the labyrinth. From the pyramid, space spreads itself out like a transparent mechanism, its borders, center, power relations and underlying logics evident to the voyeur. The establishing shots of the Shirley, Pittsburgh, and Greenbelt sections, combined with their concatenation of spatially diverse phenomena, produce just such a vantage. Nothing is forbidden to the pyramid except experience. For that, one must descend into the labyrinth where space can be traversed, lived, and activated. But, engulfed by and incorporated into space, the voyager cannot analyze it. This sense of engulfment is produced by the low-angle shots, crowded frames, and occasional editing incoherence of the New York section. Conceptual space and experiential space speak two different languages, and are mutually uncomprehending. By juxtaposing conceptual space with experiential space in an attempt to valorize the garden city, *The City* demonstrates the ways that the garden city, like all productions of abstract space, excludes spatial practices. More important, it suggests that a visual construction of the apparently blind and blinding labyrinth is itself a critique of abstract space.

**Notes**

1 *The City*, DVD, directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke (1939; New York, NY; Naxos DVD, 2009).

(New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1947), 76-79. All citations of Grierson are taken from the latter.
3 Grierson, 76.
5 Medhurst and Benson, 68-71.
7 Grierson, 107.
8 Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 34, 70.
9 Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, DVD, directed by Walter Ruttmann (1928; Berlin, Germany; Image Entertainment, 1999).
12 Lefebvre argues that this disarticulation is mutually constitutive with abstract space, 48-54.

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