

Jason Skonieczny

The Jouissance of Décroissance: The Depression to Today

Produced in 1938, The City by Ralph Steiner and Pare Lorentz with voiceover by technological historian, architectural planner and Herman Melville scholar, Lewis Mumford, was commissioned by the American Institute of planners in 1938. Steiner and Lorentz had worked together earlier in the decade with other socially concerned filmmakers--a number of whom had interests in Marxist politics and the soviet filmmaking experiments of the 1920's of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko. The Plow that Broke the Plains and The River, two earlier projects headed by Lorentz working with Steiner, Paul Strand, and Leo Hurwitz as camera crew addressed the topics of mismanagement of rural land--deforestation and over-cultivation that lead to soil erosion and degradation. The demands placed on rural resources by urban commerce are implicated in these earlier films that were commissioned by Roosevelt's Farm Securities administration. The earlier films explained the causes of the problems and need for government interventions, particularly those involving the resettling of farmers displaced by the dust bowl disasters of the early 1930s. These film on rural society were the films that earned Lorentz and Steiner the commission to make the City.

The City, on the other hand, takes city life as the target of a visual and spoken critique. The contrast of the noise pollute, air polluted, crowded, dangerous city rife with inequality followed throughout the film and the bucolic village of times past that the first scenes introduce is stark but seems perhaps overly nostalgic. The dialectic of country and city laid out by the The City is a one-sided one--that is the the country village model of life is clearly better in all ways considered, and we should note that any perceived cultural advancements of cosmopolitan culture which might even out the sides of this contrast are not registered in a film that addresses the ethic of planners and architects, a technical elite more than a cultural elite. The address is such that even though the problems of the city are problems with architecture and infrastructure, these problems shape and largely inhibit cultural life for the majority who live and work there.

The solution posed to the problems of the dialectic of country and city--whose deleterious effects are depicted here largely as they are experienced in the city (even though Lorentz and Steiner had already made films about soil damage resulting from agriculture in modern capitalism) is of course the overcoming of the dialectic of country and city. City suburbs, so-called Greenbelt towns, where ample minimally built work and leisure space would coexist, where productive agricultural land, manufacturing facilities, and residential spaces would be arranged in close proximity to one another. The film advocates a modern return to certain pre-modern aspects of living, a profusion of common, well-tended and protected space, the accessibility by foot or bicycle of both recreational and productive space. This seems though, more like a modernization of the country model, what the city-suburb would learn from the city is really not so clear. The last segment of the film seems rather rushed.

But the social shift advocated here seems quite aptly described by a word that is à la mode in France right now among ecological leftists, especially in the midst of a financial crisis. The word is *décroissance*; the meaning is a progressive lessening of diminishing, *décroissance* is the antonym to *croissance*, the french word for growth or accumulation in a capitalist economy. The root word is taken from the latin *crescere*,

which described the cycles of the moon, and the word interestingly enough even in its positive form *croissance* conveys the idea that economical growth has limits, just as the moon can only grow to a certain degree of luminosity before the *décroissance*.

The effects of the American economy lurching against certain limits to growth had been felt over the years preceding the production of The City. The film advocates for a rational descent, a *décroissance*, from the negative effects on human life in the modern economy. We can think today of the **top employees of AGI who used federal bailout money to escape from their jobs to find their way to a spa weekend**. The City poses the question, if modern capitalism is so stressful, if the spaces and movements it requires of its inhabitants, so oppressive why do people work so hard to keep it in place rather than moving a reformed ecologically sound work place into the country space, bringing the office and the factory closer to the spa, the park, and the forest. This was the kind of dream written about by turn of the century British socialist William Morris, and it is also the kind of dream flirted with by the promises of flex time in the current (or just passed) information revolution--the laptop on the beach model--in spite of the highly reified and superficial aspect of this second vision. But the film tries to carve out a vision of social reform and a retreat from established models of economic growth that is based on a greater profusion of pleasure rather than pain and irritation in everyday life. To a certain extent, we might say that the film's object--at the same time as we note that this object was not fully achieved--and I will appropriate another French word for this, one more familiar to American cultural and literary criticism, the film attempts to elicit a *jouissance of décroissance*.

In the 1973 work *Le Plaisir du Texte*, Roland Barthes described *jouissance* as the radical pleasure of all literature that played with language. The pleasure of a radical poetry sets aside language's role as the supposed representation of a content or an object in order to undo the work that language ordinarily performs on the human subject. If language ordinarily assigns a person a social and economic role, describes tasks to perform, places the subject in reality of demands and orders, in short situates the subject inside class relations, and further, if the traditional realism of the novel tends to reaffirm language in reaffirming class relations, then the language of *jouissance* on the other hand, the language of radical poetry and word play calls the self-evidence of language and therefore the self-evidence and necessity of social relations and economic habits into question. Barthes's models for radical poetry were the modernists Nietzsche, Mallarmé, and Proust among others and his optic was clearly Marxist. But, The City's play with images of city life, its visual poetry its drawing out the irrationality of supposedly advanced world of city life results in a critique of city life that is a corrosive critique of life in modern capitalism. The massive inequalities of the urban environment are at stake here, and class relations as well.

One can also see parallels, I think, between the montages of city life and a number of massacre sequences of the films of Eisenstein. When the army of the Russian Bourgeois pre-Bolshevik government marches on unarmed workers in Strike, Battleship Potemkin, or October. The City seems to aspire to the style of Eisenstein's battle scenes in terms of sensory disorientation and the disassembling of city space into pure lines, intensified abstract elements. Like Eisenstein's massacre scenes, they present the horrific threat that modern capitalism in general, exemplified metonymically by modern architecture, poses to the body.

There is a discontinuity, however, between the formal *jouissance* of the city scenes and the idyllic shots of the city-suburbs. Perhaps, as the existing work of planners is being posed as the solution to a complex problem--and the AIP were placing certain demands on the filmmakers-- the work of aesthetic discovery could not link up continuously or adequately enough with the envisioning of pleasures of an ostensibly new way of life in the city-suburbs. Whatever *jouissance* achieved in the play with form and visual poetry of the city sections does not move seamlessly to elicit the desire for the new life of the city-suburb. Or, aesthetic play and the new suburb do not seem one like one and the same movement.

But we should not attribute this break between the pleasure in the visual poetry of The City's critique of city life and the supposed pleasures of the world of *décroissance* that it is the Marxist viewpoint being expressed in The City that excludes ecological reform as a social paradigm. John Bellamy Foster has shown in his book Marx's Ecology that the mismanagement and progressive destruction of the living systems that supply natural resources--most importantly soil and forests, nourished particularly by the growth of large cities and the extraction of populations from immediate access to these resources was as destructive and pointed as the inequalities of classes. Moreover, there is a reciprocal intensification between, on the one hand, the inequalities of social groups between the organizers of labor and laborer, and on the other hand, the general inefficiency and strain on natural systems of increasing distance from food, fiber, and structural crop production of populations, manufacturing centers and consumption centers. The alienation of the worker from the land through laws of ownership and enclosure beginning in the early modern era and the first essential step and intensifying the subjection of the worker to scarcity was a continuing necessity in keeping the worker in a state of exploitation, according to Marx. For one thing, the fact that human manure and other compostable waste of population centers ceased to be returned to the productive soil had even by Marx's time been recognized as a key aspect in soil depletion necessitating the use of chemical and then later in the twentieth century petrochemical fertilizers. And now with the use of biosolids, in more and more areas, human wastes are returned to productive soil but only after a massively energy and water intensive process and after being contaminated with heavy metals from the sewage stream. Furthermore, the separation of productive land from the city would not only precipitate soil degradation leading to the use of petrochemical fertilizer but would require the massive amounts of energy to transport food and other goods to city centers which accounts for a huge chunk of automobile emissions, leading to climate change, and the predicted deluge of climate refugees promises to constitute an even further alienated and desperate proletariat class.

So even if it is not because of the presence of Marxism that Lorentz and Steiner's The City falls short of an example of a true *jouissance of décroissance*, of a poetic practice that might generate a sense of continuity between the work of restructuring human ecology, resolving the dialectic of country and city and the pleasure of poetic experience--which students of cultural studies now claim to find everywhere, not just in modern literature, but in Tv and video games, etc., all kinds of experience that are Bourgeois in ways that Barthes would not have appreciated. What would a text that truly supplied the reader with material for a *jouissance of décroissance*?

Well, Barthes wrote that babbling is a characteristic of the radical text, *echolalia*,

in technical terms the pure play with the pleasure of material speech, the sounds made by the mouth, allowed to invade contaminate and undermine the level of expressed meaning. The goal, then, would be to produce plans for a *décroissance*, not in the form of a linear order or a simple dialectic--especially one so one-sided as that expressed by *The City*, where the country is so clearly superior but in the form of a babbling that would come upon potential alterations in current life-ways not by adherence to some grand plan but by chance and play. A mechanism that is itself a practice of exploratory pleasure that would ferret out the most pleasurable and secure new life-ways. What I am imagining is the ability of the consumer public to simulate ecological change.

I am saying that the public cannot be expected to demand vital changes in the way business is done unless the information is not only shoved in their face, but put directly in their hands. And it is here that I am trying to propose both a more radical, and more rhizomatic ecological agenda--one that I hope would argue for widespread engagement in making informed opinions and judgments on just how contemporary resource flows and technology ought to be altered. In short, you cannot extricate yourself from the infrastructure of the planet, it needs to be dismantled.

So there is a preliminary case of what I want to argue for as an alternative, alternative to sustainability or what I want to argue that environmental activists should be demanding. Its this recent Patagonia website feature, The Footprint Chronicles. The website traces about 8 products of Patagonia's through several stages of development providing information about the carbon footprint, the energy consumed, something about the locations of the factories, where the cotton and rubber comes from. Nowhere on it does it mention sustainability. The amount of carbon produced in making a pair of shoes is a whole lot. But they are making improvements, but they also have to confess that for instance the carbon footprint of the pair of their shoes is very large. What they're doing is submitting themselves to surveillance by the public rather than trying to survey the consumer public like most companies today. Granted Patagonia stuff is really expensive, I don't own anything Patagonia But it is a start towards a model for environmental change that I think is more powerful than sustainability. I am going to call this movement that does not exist yet: Process Freedom. Not Process - Colon - Freedom, like Operation: Free Iraq, or the like. I am referring to the freedom of processes. Think of this as an extension to open source programming, except the idea is that everything should be open source, the earth should be open source.

Now the rhizomatic aspect of this comes in if you can imagine a public that does not only have access to information about products like that provided by patagonia, and more. But when the public has the ability to manipulate and re-envision the actual product supply chains of its products manipulating geographical data about resource processing and output locations in virtual space then thinking about ecological change can proceed rhizomatically, unrestrained by the arborescent structures of corporate interests. The ability to move populations would be another feature of the game. This is kind of what the old SIMcity started out as. Although SimCity kind of took place in a kind of any-space-whatever, you build your imaginary city here or there and what I am talking about would have to be grounded to actual facts of the geography of production.

The deployment of ostensibly free process information in the movement towards organic agriculture might be one exception the corporation state, and different sectors of production as they lurch towards obscure goals of green-ness or sustainability have

remained largely arborescent. The branchings and growths are conceived as staying within the striated segment determined by the main branch of the economic agenda of a company involved rather than intentionally creating new fields from new combinations and the rerouting of resource flows. Granting freedom to the facts about processes, and to the processes themselves would make way for a collective means of thinking and suggesting virtual rhizomatic change. Rather than branchings within a given field, new connections between powers and resources could be conceived and lie in wait for actualization. Whether the powers that be would follow such a rhizomatic virtual re-envisioning into actualization would admittedly be another question. The power to make companies submit their products to process freedom is in the hands of consumers, however.

Such Process Freedom, conceived as the ready access to play with and suggest in a virtual field, alterations in the actuality of Integrated World Capitalism is necessary in order for intelligence to speak to power. The potential means for delivering the facts to a mass of intelligence that is right now being held in check by lack of knowledge is in place: The complexity of simulation games and the ability for exchange of ideas constituted by the internet holds just such a potential. Whereas, I would have to say that what characterizes the internet at present is "too much communication." Facebook may be pleasurable, but it facilitates neither radical *jouissance* nor *décroissance*. But why shouldn't data on manufacturing of goods, including of information services themselves are not made a part of internet gaming and public/social networking.

So with process freedom the public would be capable of achieving a *jouissance of décroissance*. The agenda would be: do not just look for the sustainable label, and do not be convinced that the buying products labeled sustainable is enough to be an ethical ecologist. For every product you buy, demand information on carbon emissions, energy consumption, geographical source of the fabric and materials, factory locations, worker conditions information on the machines that build the machines that build the machine. Eventually demand to have the ability to view this information in an apparatus that can simulate restructuring and reallocating labor and resources. Any one who can connect to the internet can play. The ability to assemble and manipulate data on this scale is now a potential of technology, democratic virtual restructuring is a potential in this internet, transmission and visualization/manipulation for global democratic rhizomatic thinking through ecological simulation is now possible, but it will not be for long. Security conceived of as the stratification of scarcity will continue to lead towards more widespread experiences of scarcity of necessities and more concentrated caged in populations lurching towards sustainability (or sustaining themselves on the lives of others lived in scarcity), secure populations that perceive themselves as increasingly at risk (something like a restricted super-rich class with access to solar power, local organic agriculture, private police protection, and what remains of jet and helicopter fuel and services). Demanding the ability to be a truly informed consumer and the ability to play pragmatically and suggest progressive rhizomatic restructuring of global resource supply flows and this trend might yet find our way to a non-human community of life and to bring *décroissance* to a mainstream of society otherwise hurtling blindly forward.