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*Media Culture Society* 2005; 27; 523


DOI: 10.1177/0163443705053975

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## Framing Regent Park: the National Film Board of Canada and the construction of 'outcast spaces' in the inner city, 1953 and 1994

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... down came the verminous walls, the unclean, the unhealthy buildings and down came the fire hazards, the juvenile delinquency, the drunkenness, the broken marriages and up rose, something new, the nation's first large public housing project. (Lorne Greene, narrator, *Farewell to Oak Street*, National Film Board of Canada, 1953a)

In 1953 and 1994 the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) produced two documentary films about Canada's first and largest public housing project, Toronto's Regent Park. *Farewell to Oak Street* charted the dramatic 'before' and 'after' effects of public housing on the family, social and cultural life of the inner-city dwellers whose 'slum housing' was demolished in the late 1940s and early 1950s to make way for the pioneering housing scheme. The film was didactically scripted and shot to highlight the striking shift in the built and social environment from the untidy, run-down, row housing of the working-class 'slum' to the spotless modernism of the houses and walk-up apartments of Regent Park. *Farewell* would be widely trumpeted by the City of Toronto until the late 1960s to publicize the triumph of its urban renewal campaign. Forty years later, the NFB made a *Return to Regent Park*. This time round, the film centred on the abject failure of public housing and urban renewal in Toronto and the efforts of activists to combat drugs, crime and the physical/social stigma of the project. Using interviews with activists, local politicians and planners, and deftly punctuating its narrative with clips from its 1953 predecessor, it offers a much more subtle portrait of a state-created 'ghetto' and its residents.

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*Media, Culture & Society* © 2005 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 27(4): 523–549  
[ISSN: 0163-4437 DOI: 10.1177/0163443705053975]

I argue in this article that both NFB films contributed to the powerful *territorial stigmatization* of inner-city workers and public housing tenants as social and cultural deviants. Such stigmatizing renderings were not free-floating ideological and spatial representations, but reflected and reinforced real spatial and social divisions in the city and had concrete political, economic and social consequences for tenants. In the first section, I briefly review the literature on documentary films, endorsing an interdisciplinary approach that draws on film criticism and historical–geographical studies of the representational images of the city in the material, ideological and political context of film production and the wider society. I provide some background on the cinematic treatment of the city and the history of the NFB in the second section. In the third section, I turn to Regent Park and how it has been socially constructed as an ‘outcast space’. In the two substantive sections on the documentary films, I integrate a close reading of the politics, ideology and spatial representations embedded within the films with analyses of the intentions of the film-makers and of the general context of urban renewal and public housing, to demonstrate the potent role visual representations played in constructing Regent Park as a ‘branded space’, and its tenants as social ‘outcasts’, in the words of Loïc Wacquant (1996: 237). The NFB reflected and reproduced a symbolic external representation of the old slum area and the new housing project as modern-day Babels, perilous problem areas full of dysfunctional families and cultural misfits. In a concluding section, I underscore how this powerful place-based stigma, brought to national prominence by Canada’s influential state film agency, would complement the damning and pervasive characterizations of Regent Park residents by social workers, academics and the media. In general, therefore, I aim to open up critical windows on the politics and ideology of urban redevelopment in Canada’s premier metropolis.

### **Reading and mapping the documentary film in historical context**

Scholars of film studies have long paid attention to non-fiction films as important cultural artifacts of society. At the risk of simplifying a diverse and complex literature, film studies specialists have focused their research on three key areas involved in the documentary form: technological factors, sociological dimensions and aesthetic concerns. The latter area has been the most contentious with considerable debate over how to approach the complex ‘visual’ and ‘verbal’ languages of documentaries with many film scholars adopting complex methodologies of ‘textual’ analysis from literary theory (Wells, 1999: 214). Historians, on the other hand, have tended to view non-fiction films uncritically, as rich repositories of primary sources.

As Robert Rosenstone aptly notes, historians frequently accept documentaries as 'a more accurate way of representing the past, as if somehow the images appear on the screen unmediated'. Documentaries, of course, may reveal previously unknown facts about places, people and events. Taken as a whole, however, it is crucial to remember that we do not see in the documentary film 'the events themselves, and not the events as experienced or even as witnessed by participants, but selected images of those events carefully arranged into sequences to tell a story or to make an argument' (Rosenstone, 1988: 1179–80). As with other hitherto unproblematic sources, historians such as Steven Ross have begun to analyse films as prominent exemplars of 'visual ideology' that need to be situated firmly in their historical context (Ross, 2003). Cultural geographers, too, have studied both the industrial geographies of the film industry and the depictions of places and people within documentaries and fiction films. They have focused on mapping the 'representational' spaces of these particularly prominent media texts (Lukinbeal, 1998).

To some extent, therefore, there has been an increasing specialization of the study of documentary film into discrete disciplinary realms of theory and practice. This is unfortunate because all three approaches can offer penetrating insights into the medium. In this article, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on elements of film criticism as well as historical and geographical studies. By focusing on technological, sociological and aesthetic elements of non-fiction film, film studies scholars have provided a rich vocabulary of film analysis and methodologies to help 'read' films. Historians are best able to connect the visual ideology of the film to its historical context and historical archival research can shed much light on the material background and ideological genesis of a film's production. Geographers' concentration on space in general and places more particularly (Merrifield, 1993) enriches our understanding of both the representational spaces depicted on the screen and the material construction of the 'real' physical spaces of the city.

### **The documentary, the city and the NFB**

Numerous studies have revealed the poignant effects of photographs in the popular construction of the 'slum' in the late 19th and early 20th century (Hales, 1984; Strange, 1989). Yet surprisingly few researchers have highlighted the potent role played by film in shaping popular attitudes towards the inner city and the urban poor. Yet from its origins in the late 19th century, film has frequently utilized the city as its subject. Utilizing avant-garde and surrealist techniques, Brazilian director Alberto Cavalcanti released *Rien que les heures* (1926), a film about socio-economic inequality in Paris. The next year, German film-maker Walter Ruttmann directed the

much-acclaimed *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* which followed Cavalcanti's approach of 'using footage of real locations to reveal the disparity between rich and poor'. As Paul Wells writes, 'Despite their formalist pretensions, the films succeed in making social comment, and are influential in their achievement of using images of everyday people, objects and locations for symbolic and political effect' (1999: 216). Yet it was in the 1930s with the rise of John Grierson and the British documentary movement that film most pointedly engaged with the 'urban' for a mass audience.

Grierson, a one-time director with experience in Hollywood, founded and administered the semi-state agencies, the British Empire Marketing Board's Film Unit (1930–34) and the General Post Office Film Unit (1934–9). From 1939 to 1945, he headed the NFB in Canada and later tackled similar assignments in Australia and New Zealand (Barnouw, 1993: 87–99). From 1929 to 1952, he 'gave impetus to a movement' (Gold and Ward, 1997: 63) that resulted in the production of over 1000 films and helped shape the technical, social and aesthetic elements of documentary film-making for more than a generation.

According to John R. Gold and Stephen V. Ward, Grierson emphasized three main points in the making of the documentary film. First, he saw his mission as one of 'public service'. Documentary film was regarded as an efficient teacher of public values and morality. In Grierson's case, these were based on a 'loose social-democratic reformism' that endorsed limited state intervention to alleviate the social and economic problems of capitalism. Such mild reformism was, moreover, palatable to the state and commercial sponsors of his films. Second, Grierson believed that 'truth' was 'not produced by simply turning on a camera and pointing it at an appropriate subject, but emerged from the creative notions that guide the various stages of film production from preparation, through shooting, to assembly' (Gold and Ward, 1997: 63). Finally, Grierson aimed to tell this 'truth' through both aesthetic and sociological means, utilizing innovations in sound and editing combined with a clear focus on the social and economic conditions of the period. Grierson's outlook meshed neatly with the aims of government and the mass media in the period, both of whom were keen on using the power of the media to construct 'educated' citizens (Wells, 1999: 219). Governments especially welcomed the propaganda value of film-making during the war.

Grierson would put his ideologically charged ideas on 'slums' and the necessity of public housing to good use in the 1930s. Numerous films he oversaw in Britain charted the decrepit state of working-class housing and its effects on 'slum' dwellers. The slum clearance and public housing movement was seen as a panacea and symbol 'of progress that provides hope for the future' (Gold and Ward, 1997: 65). As Gold and Ward emphasize, however, what is left out is equally important. There is little

attention to the causes of overcrowded and dilapidated housing: they are just regarded neutrally as the 'result of history and unenlightened practices' (Gold and Ward, 1997: 65). Film-makers also purveyed a simplistic environmental determinism that portrayed blighted areas and their residents as rife with social pathologies. Moreover, working-class residents are always seen as unequivocally welcoming the new public housing developments even though we know that many communities were uprooted and destroyed with little input or consent from the actual residents. In some cases, they openly resisted the destruction of their neighbourhoods (Brushett, 2001; Purdy, 2003a). In general, 'slum dwellers' are seen purely as objects of state social policy, which downplayed structural explanations for poverty and ignored the agency of the poor.

Historians of the Grierson-founded NFB tell a similar story in the Canadian context. They have demonstrated that both management and the creative staff were imbued with a social mission to highlight the trials and tribulations, diversity and achievements, of post-war Canada. According to the chronicler of the NFB, Gary Evans, it was imbued with a profound 'public duty and public responsibility' (1991: x). Unlike the ubiquitous and popular Hollywood film, it tackled thorny social issues such as real-life crime, substance abuse, racism, poverty, and less catchy topics such as urban and economic development that Hollywood film-makers generally avoided. Contrary to Evans, however, the NFB did not stand 'outside the capitalist paradigm that drives the rest of North America' (Evans, 1991: xi). While it may have been largely free from direct political intervention by its government paymasters and willing to engage with more controversial issues, it nevertheless depicted a middle-class view of the world with hackneyed images of women, workers and the poor. It celebrated a rational and efficient ordering of the tumultuous post-war capitalist world, advocating modernizing social change within gradualist boundaries.<sup>1</sup> Part and parcel of this vision was the rigorous advocacy of the 'advantages of democracy' to counter the ever-present threat of Communism. As Peter Morris puts it, the NFB stressed, 'Social change is possible and desirable but should be *gradual*' (1981: 9, author's emphasis).

The NFB of the early 1990s was, of course, a different organization than the one founded by Grierson in 1939. Highly acclaimed over the years for its innovative approaches to animation, short films and documentary, it has received over 70 Oscar nominations. It continued to engage with a wide variety of politically controversial topics in the 1960s and in 1974 created Studio D, a production unit dedicated solely to films on women's issues by women film-makers. It has gained a reputation for producing socially critical material and has continued to engage with themes unpalatable to the mainstream commercial studios. In the 1990s, the NFB made critically acclaimed and commercially successful films such as Alanis Obomsawin's, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, which chronicles and celebrates the

long-standing struggles of the Mohawk nation against the Canadian state and John N. Smith's, *The Boys of St. Vincent*, a docudrama about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, which was chosen as one of the ten top films of the year by *Rolling Stone*, *USA Today* and *Entertainment Weekly* and was watched by an estimated 5 million people on its opening television broadcast in Canada (NFB, 2004).

Despite critical and popular success, the NFB fell victim to severe budget cuts in the federal government's fiscal austerity programme of the 1990s. Many NFB productions are now co-financed and produced with other private and state entities, which has diversified the creative and political content of the documentaries. Increasingly, the documentary has also become a 'hybrid of forms', Paul Wells argues, 'using the cinematic vocabularies of narrative "fiction" to apparently present "fact" in a critical mode'. Moreover, most documentaries are now primarily viewed on television, broadening the audience 'and speaking to a seemingly insatiable interest by audiences worldwide to engage with another aspect of themselves and the world they live in' (Wells, 1999: 230).

### **Regent Park and post-war reconstruction**

Public housing in Canada emerged as part of the broader reform impulse of governments at all levels during the post-Second World War reconstruction period. The federal government constructed some dwellings for war workers and established a veterans' housing programme (Harris and Shulist, 2001) but shortages remained severe in most urban centres throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. During the war, unions, veterans' organizations, the Communist Party of Canada and other socialists were instrumental in organizing mass demonstrations, occupations of public buildings and militant defences of home-owners and tenants threatened with foreclosure and eviction – all of which were effective in pressuring the state for more action on the housing front (Bacher, 1989; Brushett, 2001; Choko, 1980; Wade, 1994). A remarkable example of this heightened sense of social conflict can be seen in the 1949 Toronto municipal elections. Ross Dowson, mayoral candidate for the Revolutionary Workers Party, a far-left Trotskyist party, received 23,000 votes (20 percent of the total) on a platform of, among other radical proposals, a massive emergency housing programme (*Labor Challenge*, 1949). In addition to fears of increased class conflict, there was a widespread opinion in policy circles that the post-war economy was likely to return to the marked economic instability of the Depression years unless the state intervened (Berry, 1999).

Unlike the tumultuous 'Red Years' of the post-First World War era, during this time the government could count on an 'evangelistic' middle-

class housing reform movement as a key ally in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Composed of Keynesian-influenced social scientists, intellectuals and community activists, reformers believed that comprehensive urban revitalization programmes could allay the impact of post-war economic and social volatility. Kevin Brushett has shown, in a detailed study of the politics of post-war urban planning in Toronto, that a strong and diverse reform coalition led by the Community Housing and Planning Association – composed of local businessmen, social workers, academics, and social democratic and communist activists among others – played a central role in successfully lobbying at all stages for public housing in Toronto (Brushett, 2001: chs 1–2). These ‘public housers’ envisioned the project as a spatially and socially ordered community, free from the debilitating vagaries of ‘slum life’. From the 1930s onwards, they made a successful financial and moral case for the benefits of slum clearance and rebuilding and won the local government over to an interventionist policy. The City of Toronto put a question on the 1947 municipal election ballot asking voters (at this time, only property owners and long-term leaseholders) for financial and political support for a large-scale public housing project; 62 percent of the voters answered in the affirmative (Rose, 1958). Two years later, Regent Park North, the ground-breaking effort in Canadian public housing, would open its doors amid much fanfare and celebration by City Hall and the reform lobby.

Regent Park was constructed in the working-class neighbourhood of Cabbagetown in downtown Toronto. The majority of inhabitants were descendants of English, Scottish and Irish immigrants who worked in local factories and businesses. The area had long been characterized as a blighted area by what Seán Damer aptly calls ‘slumologists’ (1989). The northern section was composed largely of three-storey walk-up apartments and row houses; it began accepting low-income families and some senior citizens in 1949 and was completed by 1957. Regent Park South, completed in 1959, exclusively housed families and comprised a mix of townhouses and five large apartment buildings. By 1960, the two sections of the development contained approximately 10,000 people, a figure reduced to approximately 7500 residents by the 1990s. Although the vast majority of federal government assistance in housing would be directed to homeowners, financial institutions and developers, there was a short political space in the late 1940s through the 1960s in which state investment in low-income housing was considered a viable option. By 1988, there were almost 5000 public housing projects in Canada, the largest percentage in the industrial province of Ontario, housing approximately 430,000 people (Sewell, 1994: 138). Metro Toronto leads Canadian cities with 29,000 units of public housing spread out over 125 separate projects (Murdie, 1994: 299).

### **Constructing 'outcast spaces'**

Urban geographers and historians have established that places are sites of material social relations as well as culture, ideology and 'structures of feeling' (Bauder, 2001: 281). Specific locales hold significant meanings for individuals and groups on an ideological and cultural level and are invested with 'powerful associations and emotive resonances' (Reay and Lucy, 2001: 411; see also Appadurai, 1988; Gotham and Brumley, 2002: 265). This argument holds for both internal and external representations of places. Considerable historical research has been conducted on external, often racialized, depictions of 'slum' neighbourhoods, for instance, showing that the substance and rhetoric of slum representations revealed more about distinctly white, middle-class notions of what constituted a proper neighbourhood and requisite behaviour than they did about the actual physical, social and cultural environments of the poor and minorities (Anderson, 1991; Ley, 2000; Mayne, 1993; Ward, 1984). From the disorderly, Victorian slums of the 19th century to the dangerous 'no go' neighbourhoods of today, these slum representations have had a tenacious hold on the imaginations and practices of 20th-century urban reformers, the media, state officials and the wider public in both developed and developing nations (Mooney, 2000; Outtes, 2003).

The Cabbagetown area razed to build Regent Park, and its residents, were subject to such a nefarious representation from the 1930s onward, which assisted the state and the reform movement in making their case for slum clearance and public housing. Most historians have overlooked the spatial dimensions of these brutalizing images of the poor. Identity and place were firmly entangled, nonetheless, in the minds of the growing cadre of slumologists. 'Deviant' spaces – frequently the urban conglomeration itself, but more particularly, disreputable slum areas of the city – produced 'deviant' people (Valverde, 1991: 132). For urban reformers, as David Ward contends, slums expressed 'the presumed causal links between social isolation, and adverse environment and deviant behaviour' (1984: 304). Thus, the urban reform campaign constructed a powerful slum narrative of Cabbagetown punctuated by exotic images of social pathology and 'dangerous spaces', such as back alleys and streets where people congregated in a disorderly and often sexually licentious fashion. Images of poor housing conditions, poverty, filth and moral wickedness were condensed into one striking picture of abject misery that was propagated en masse by the reform lobby, state officials and the main media outlets in Toronto and nationally. Exoticizing the physical shabbiness of dwellings and neighbourhoods and the troublesome behaviours ostensibly produced by them was not only a instrument of moral indictment, it was also a rhetorical technique intended to sufficiently unsettle the social imagination of the

public to acquire support for slum clearance and public housing (Purdy, 2003a; Walkowitz, 1992: ch.1).

For a short period in the 1950s, the discourse of housing betterment focused on how the residents of the newly built Regent Park had been economically, socially and morally transformed due to the new public housing environment. These arguments essentially centred on how residents had adopted 'decent' ways of living in line with the norms of post-war middle-class notions of family and community. From the 1960s to the 1990s, however, a series of economic, political and social shifts within public housing and the larger socio-economic context shaped a new slum discourse. By the late 1960s, the project itself would increasingly be characterized as a 'slum', similar in many respects to the Cabbagetown neighbourhood that was destroyed to build it. Condemned as too large and badly designed by academics, as a haven of single mothers, welfare families and deviants by governments and the media, a magnet for crime and drug problems by police and law and order advocates, and the site of potentially explosive 'racial' problems by many popular commentators, it had come full circle in the public mind from the 'ordered community' of the 1940s.

The media played a crucial role in constructing Regent Park as a dangerous problem area. As a number of scholars have established, the mainstream media tends to cover poor working-class, immigrant and/or black neighbourhoods in such a way as to stress anything that runs counter to the accepted social, economic and moral order (Entman, 1992; Evans and Swift, 2000; Knight, 1998). In such a way, Regent Park was almost always characterized in all forms of the local and national media as solely a site of poverty, behavioural problems and crime (Purdy, 2003a). The wider public, with little or no direct experience of the project or its tenants, only received the 'bad' and the sensational from the media, significantly distorting their opinions on the project and its tenants. As Jacqueline Leavitt and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris comment:

For most people, the public housing territory falls outside the cocoon of their immediate, familiar space and is foreign to their understanding. As places dominated by other subcultures the developments seem alien and remote to outsiders. In such instances, one uncritically adopts the media's representations and interpretations that rarely go beyond a surface look of the physical and social context. The social meanings often become dematerialized into insubstantial myths and impressions formed by a superficial 'outsiders' look. The effects on the insiders can be substantial. (Leavitt and Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995: 224)

Such harmful portrayals reinforced stigmatization by obscuring structural explanations for poverty and concealing the agency of tenants in contesting these brutalizing characterizations (Venkatesh, 2000; Williams, 1998).<sup>3</sup> It is

in this context that we need to situate the spatial representations of Regent Park in documentary films.

### *A Farewell to Oak Street*

Despite its differences from Hollywood, the NFB enjoyed a truly mass audience in the 1940s and 1950s. It produced literally thousands of films on diverse topics, which were seen as newsreels trailing popular Hollywood films and in monthly Film Board showings in schools, community centres and churches. NFB films were widely distributed abroad and were shown on Canada-bound ships containing immigrants and refugees. According to the NFB, audiences at community showings alone constituted 9 million persons annually in 1948 (Evans, 1991: 7).

*Farewell to Oak Street* (NFB, 1953a; 17 minutes) enjoyed a mass audience markedly larger than the specialist expositions of social workers and academics. Conceived as part of an ongoing project boasting of the resilience of the country in the post-war era, the *Canada Carries On* series, it was mainly shown across the country as an introduction to popular films in the theatre. With the advent of television, it was probably rebroadcast on television numerous times, as was the custom with NFB shorts. The Housing Authority of Toronto (HAT), which managed Regent Park North, used it as one of its key propaganda tools. In 1949, Henry Matson, secretary of HAT, heeded the advice of his counterpart in the Detroit Housing Authority, J.H. Inglis, to overcome opposition to slum clearance by using visual images such as films and photographs 'to illustrate the dilapidated character of the buildings you propose to demolish' and therefore win over a sometimes reluctant public (Inglis, 1949). HAT personnel would play a close collaborative role in the making of the film, making suggestions for scenes and delighting in the positive publicity the film offered (Matson, 1949). Throughout the first 20 years of Regent Park's history, *Farewell to Oak Street* would be shown regularly to university and high school audiences as well as diverse community groups. In 1965, it was running twice weekly to 'interested' groups in the community and was compulsory viewing for nurses in Toronto-area hospitals on their annual field trips to the development (Bradley and Noble, 1965). In 1966–7, over 50 showings of the film were scheduled (Housing Authority of Toronto, 1966–7). Indeed, until the 1980s, Ontario housing authorities periodically ordered new prints from the NFB for educational use (Evans, 1991: 37).

The film was written and produced by Gordon Burwash and directed by Grant Maclean, seasoned staffers at the NFB. Extraordinarily, it was made over a five-year period and, for a 17-minute short, its \$29,000 price tag was remarkably costly at the time, demonstrating the NFB's commitment to constructing well-wrought images of the progress of the nation. Shooting

of the exteriors of existing houses slated for demolition and the beginnings of construction began in the summer of 1948. Filming of the interior of 'slum' habitations commenced in the spring 1949 and editing and voice-over narration was completed over the next four years. Apparently, the film had the personal backing of NFB commissioner, W.H. Irwin, former editor of the prominent weekly news magazine, *Maclean's*, and a staunch urban renewal advocate (Evans, 1991: 37).

Burwash continued the tradition of the wartime NFB founder, John Grierson, in didactically scripting the film to make a crystal-clear propaganda statement about the physical and social depravity of the Cabbagetown slums and the modern promise of public housing. In 1949, he wrote to Matson, that for the interior shots 'we would like to shoot a family in its old residence (*the more slum-like the better*), the family's moving activity (van, wheelbarrows, or what have you), and the family *joyfully taking possession of the new home*' (Burwash, 1949, author's emphasis). As in the classic documentary film, it aimed to project 'a generalized reality or social truth' (Morris, 1981: 7) which, in the eyes of the film-makers and contemporary reformers, consisted of the shameful contrast between the decrepit disorder of Cabbagetown and the efficiency of the new housing development (Mulholland, 1949). To accomplish this, it mixed a real contemporary development – the ground-breaking urban renewal scheme of Canada's largest city – with fictional vignettes of the frustrations of the 'old' and the joys of the 'new' juxtaposed throughout the film to emphasize the striking contrast.

Despite its extensive use of fictionalized dramatic scenes, therefore, it was crucial that the film convey an air of authenticity and realism (Morris, 1981: 7–9). Each of the scenes was carefully crafted, acted, sequenced and narrated to construct this 'realist' vision. Locations were used rather than studios; the majority of actors were either residents themselves or non-professionals, which was intended to drive home to the viewers that what they were seeing was the genuine thing; the voiceover narration by well-known veteran of CBC radio and later American television star, Lorne Greene, aimed to express the 'authority' of pro-urban renewal commentary. The NFB's press release gave viewers a hint of what to expect in the screening:

This is the story of how many Toronto families, jam-packed in the squalor of the city's slums, were transplanted to a new spacious life in the homes of Canada's first large public housing project, the Regent Park development. The film depicts the corrosive misery of six families, 19 persons in all, sharing one bathroom, one source of running water and the common shame of a life where home is a place to get out of, and tavern, movie-house and street are refuge from sub-standard living. But the Brown's, the Bennett's and the Biggs's of the film, like 5,000 other Cabbagetown dwellers of Toronto's East End, were fortunate. The camera follows them from their Oak Street shambles to the comfort and dignity of four and five room apartment units in the 42 acres of

Regent Park. There, paying rent according to their income, they find life has a new face and home is a place in which to live. (NFB, 1953b)

Above all, the images in the film would be depicted as if they were real scenes in real lives. In this way, the film-makers meant to emphasize the overriding social and political necessity to do away with slums and construct efficient dwelling units for the urban poor and working class.

The film opens with a conspicuous still photograph of a dilapidated Cabbagetown house. The accompanying classical music is sombre and the dreary scene is enveloped in dim and eerie light. Immediately, the vista brightens as the first buildings of Regent Park are shown in the backdrop of the project's wide-open spaces as a grocer's delivery boy makes his rounds on his bike. While Lorne Greene authoritatively announces 'not a trace' of the slum 'remains, except its people. They're still here, still occupying the same stretch of space but in a different way. Everything is sparkling, and new, and tidy and kept that way', the camera pans to a set of clean windows and a woman sweeping the floor. The documentary switches back and forth in this way, contrasting the daily irritations and larger pathologies produced by slums with the virtues of modern project living.

The boost to social life within the home is strongly emphasized in *Farewell*, reflecting the widespread concern about inharmonious relations between husbands and wives, parents and children. One scene shot in the cramped slum home shows a family sitting down for supper, everybody strangely quiet and morose. 'Supper time for the Browns,' Lorne Greene narrates, 'is the high point of any families' day. School behind, rest and relaxation ahead, the day's adventures to talk about. Hardly a time for silence. Trouble was, the Oak St. day was often best forgotten. There weren't many good days.' The frustration of the slum existence also exacerbated domestic disputes. Another section of the film depicts a husband and wife verbally sparring against the backdrop of a dark and dreary room. The narration continues, 'Not all tempers flared, some were diverted and dulled by escape' as the camera switches to an equally lifeless and dark tavern. By contrast, project life is bright and cordial. Families moving into their new units are smiling and curious. One young boy gleefully jumps into the shiny, new bathtub and the accompanying music reaches a crescendo as the whole family watches the bath water run. The film cuts to the 'brighter and more interesting and friendlier' kitchen with its well-placed, modern and efficient appliances. The husband puts his arm around his wife as they contemplate their new surroundings. The new supper table shows the family excitedly conversing. Other scenes tell a similar story: the father relaxing in the living room, reading the paper and the mother joyfully carrying out domestic chores.

The film especially accentuates women's enhanced roles as mother and housewife. Yvonne Klein-Matthews (1979) has shown that NFB films of

the 1940s–50s only validated women's roles as mothers and housewives, celebrating their natural homemaking virtues and warning against the perils of joining the male-dominated workplace. *Farewell to Oak Street* was no exception. The flaking paint, grimy walls, filthy floors and crowded rooms are distinguished conspicuously from the spacious rooms, new-fangled appliances and hardwood floors of Regent Park. Domestic work by women is duly celebrated: 'A great deal of washing and scrubbing goes on nowadays. The Maclean kitchen has a new modern look as do the Maclean ladies.' In Cabbagetown, on the other hand, 'keeping clean was a daily battle and a lost cause'. One dramatized scene shows a woman futilely attempting to kill a cockroach, expressing symbolically the frustration of women's life within the slums. Disorder and confusion are represented in the slum housing by showing six separate families trying to use the same bathroom: 'Things mislaid, everyone getting in everyone's way.'

*Farewell to Oak Street* prominently engages with the question of children's lives as well. Kids playing happily in the new project are juxtaposed in the same scene with a group of boys playing road hockey in an area not yet demolished. The message is that the orderly play spaces of 'trees, grass, playground' are better than the 'cars [and] pavement' that plague disorderly road hockey games. Greene adds that there are 'backyards too and private entrances to homes', emphasizing the privatized orderliness of Regent's row houses. Even children's physical and sexual health is dealt with in the film. One shot portrays a teacher or nurse bringing kids home with lice in their hair. Boys and girls are shown sleeping in the same bed in the slum house, a taboo frequently condemned in the contemporary literature on housing reform. And, in probably the first depiction of sexual abuse in Canadian film, a young girl is assaulted in old Cabbagetown by a neighbour (Evans, 1991: 37). Greene gravely states: 'Sometimes the vermin was human and the shame was secret', playing on the widespread, if false, notion that children were more vulnerable to sexual abuse in poor neighbourhoods. Such a sensationalist tactic was also a useful means to attract wider support for public housing (Low, 2002: 85–6).

The documentary also deliberates on the practical difficulties of finding affordable housing and how the rental system works at Regent Park. It ends on a shot of residents industrially going about their business while Greene sounds off on the NFB's liberal modernization appeal that there are, 'too many Oak Streets for such a resourceful nation'. The soundtrack ends on a triumphant note as the camera displays an impressive aerial view of the vast development.

The NFB joined contemporary sociologists, social workers and the media in contributing to the powerful stigmatization of inner-city workers. Even if the slum environment itself was largely to blame in these accounts, working families in Cabbagetown were portrayed as dirty, disreputable and

prone to various pathologies, a condition only redeemed in the eyes of the national film agency and reformers by the top-down, modernization of urban renewal and public housing. Only public housing, moreover, could reinstall women in their valid roles as housekeepers and mothers, and families to their central role as the bedrock of society and nation. Children, too, would benefit from a safe and orderly setting within the home and the neighbourhood, free from the lures of delinquency and sex. The medium of film with a mass, popular audience was a convenient and effective means to get across this message of the urgent necessity of social engineering.

The very tenants whose homes and lives were maligned were the first to respond to the documentary. A tenants' and home-owners' political association had been active since the outset of the Regent Park development, demanding a say in the process, criticizing high rents and other HAT policies, and the low compensation offered for their houses. They particularly resented the 'slum' label and, on the release of the film, communicated their disgust to their Conservative Member of Parliament, Charles Henry. They were upset because they had no chance to view the film beforehand or make suggestions, a right reserved only for housing officials. In the House of Commons, Henry criticized the negative portrayal of Cabbagetowners and requested that the film be withdrawn from circulation (Brushett, 2001: 97). It is difficult to gauge the reception of the film among the wider population but certainly the weight of the modernizing reform impulse and its support by the media suggests that the film's central message was accepted as authoritative. The *Toronto Telegram* and the *Ottawa Citizen* defended the portrayal of the 'slums' and, even though some members of the NFB Board of Governors were sympathetic to Henry's appeal, the NFB soldiered on with the marketing and distribution of the film (Evans, 1991: 37, n29, 346-7). In an era of different sensibilities and political pressures, HAT Chairman and long-time labour bureaucrat, David Archer, criticized the wooden propaganda techniques employed in the film. He told the HAT in 1966 that it was so out of date it looked 'like a Charlie Chaplin movie' (*Toronto Daily Star*, 1966). By this time, however, *Farewell to Oak Street* had already been usefully utilized by the City of Toronto to widely trumpet its urban renewal campaign. In the process, it contributed to negative characterizations of inner-city workers and the poor in Cabbagetown, a set of harmful assumptions and ideas that would soon be applied to Regent Park dwellers themselves.

### *Return to Regent Park*

Since this film was made only a decade ago, we have no archival records about *Return to Regent Park* (1994, 55 minutes); I will rely on a reading of the film in the context of public housing in the 1990s. Directed by Bay

Weyman, the film was financed and produced by the NFB, Weyman's Close-Up Productions, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's public broadcasting network. It first aired on 6 May 1994 on CBC Newsworld's, *Rough Cuts*, a weekly programme that brings new national and international documentaries to the small screen. We have no viewing figures for the documentary, but it has been replayed periodically on public television in Canada and is widely available in university, public and community libraries. In 1995, NFB head, Sandra Macdonald, told a federal parliamentary committee on Canadian Heritage that she was particularly proud of Weyman's film. In her nationalist vision of the NFB's role, she opined that, 'We dream of the day when . . . *Central Park West* [a popular American show] will be replaced by a broadcast of *Return to Regent Park*' (Parliamentary Committee on Canadian Heritage, 1995).

The film's promotional blurb gives a good introduction to the themes of the film and deserves full citation:

Ten thousand people live in Toronto's Regent Park, Canada's first large-scale housing project. Built in a spirit of post-WWII optimism that social problems could be corrected through urban renewal, Regent Park replaced a working-class neighbourhood with a modern, park-like community of apartment buildings.

But, forty years later, it has become a paradigm of city planning failure. The physical isolation of Regent Park from the surrounding community has created a unique ghetto-like environment. Within its confines, many residents feel as if they are under siege by an army of outsiders who are using the Park as a haven for drugs, prostitution and violent crime.

Frustrated by the apparent 'benign neglect' of the Metro Toronto Housing Authority, groups of Regent Park residents have banded into committees organized by residents-turned-social activists. They are now persuasive advocates of the concept that Regent Park requires radical physical redevelopment in order to be successfully reintegrated within the larger social community.

Bay Weyman lets the people of Regent Park tell their own story of desperation and hope. Featuring interviews with residents, activists, community organizers, local politicians, academic planners, and the police, the film compresses three stories into one: the failure of traditional urban renewal schemes, the impact of drugs and crime on an enclosed environment, and the positive effects of social redevelopment in which people are empowered with a newborn self-respect, changing the way they think about themselves and their community. (NFB, 1994)

Unlike its 1953 predecessor, then, the film provides substantial room for (some of the) residents themselves to discuss life in what tenants nickname 'Regent' or simply the 'Park'. In a narrative quite similar to *Farewell to Oak Street*, however, *Return to Regent Park* sets out to engage in social criticism, directing its fire at the superblock public housing design that enclosed the project's buildings within its own discrete borders. While its techniques are more subtle and elegant, the latter film also relies on the theme of the contrast between the 'old' and 'new' to tell its story. Reflecting a common technique in socially critical documentary film-

making (Georgakas, 1987–8), it constantly juxtaposes interviews with talking heads and residents and shots of the project with old archival footage from newsreels, television and *Farewell to Oak Street* itself, contrasting the overly-optimistic and top-down planning of 1940s–50s urban reformers with the drug and crime problems in the project today and the efforts of activists to sell a physical redevelopment plan to the City of Toronto.

The ‘outcast space’ narratives of the 1940s and 1950s are evident in *Return to Regent Park* even if the pathologies have changed. The problem of drugs and crime in Regent Park take up a good portion of the documentary, although residents also intersperse positive comments about living in the project. In one of the first scenes, a teenage crack dealer is interviewed on the street, expressing his frustration about the lack of economic opportunities: ‘Police don’t care. Government don’t care. They’re just trying to get elected.’ Yet he concludes by saying, ‘Despite all the bad publicity we get, I love this park.’ Betty Hubbard says, ‘My old man is from the States and lived in a ghetto and he says this is heaven compared to a ghetto.’ She goes on to say she’s from a middle-class family and, as the camera pans out over the park from her balcony, she relates, ‘When I first come here the place was great and then when the crack came out it got really bad and we started having beatings, shootings, robberies . . .’ Visibly weak and sullen, Tina Thibeault, a prostitute and crack addict who grew up in the project, talks about the nice times she had when she was a kid and contrasts it to the problems now, seeing her own history as illustrative of the change, ‘I’m to blame because I’m involved, right?’

Interspersed with the interviews are clandestine shots of drug dealing happening on the public streets and dark lanes of the development, and brutal police arrests of alleged traffickers. In one scene, one young black man threatens to break the camera and orders the crew to stop filming. Perhaps the most revealing scenes of the drug problem in the film involve George Burkle, an ex-crack addict, who was one of the key activists in the North Regent Park Residents Steering Committee (NRPRSC). As he speaks in his apartment, the camera (again clandestinely) surveys the street below showing a fistfight and the brutal beating of a black suspect by the police. Burkle explains that it is ‘welfare night’ when social assistance cheques are delivered and, according to him, it regularly sparks drinking, drug-taking and fighting until the money from the cheques is all gone. In another scene, he discusses how his life has changed and how activism has given him a focus. While we listen, the viewer is shown shady scenes of drug dealing, limousines pulling up to buy drugs and prostitutes plying their trade on the project’s many narrow lane ways and courtyards. The themes of hope and despair are continually emphasized as the camera juxtaposes the ‘bad’ with the ‘good’.

As in the slum images of *Farewell to Oak Street*, much of the film focuses on the physical deterioration of the built environment. 'The buildings are falling apart', one resident says early on in the film. One scene shows a family moving out, quoting the father as saying, 'The people and the place you can adapt to but the housing seems to deteriorate so much. Nothing gets done too much about it.' Close-up shots of graffiti ('Fuck the Police'), 'tagging', holes in the walls and overflowing garbage bins are revealed as the police and members of the redevelopment committee take the film-makers on a tour of the project. While searching the corridors of one of the buildings for drug dealers, one policeman exclaims, 'If only the camera could pick up the smell.' The documentary actually aims in this scene to reveal the tangible sensual experience of physical deterioration.

As the promotional blurb emphasizes, great effort is expended in the film to highlight the role of resident activists involved in the NRPRSC. In conjunction with a new breed of urban reformers, the tenant committee rallied around a plan to physically redevelop a section of the project, which proposed to combine private-market rental units and various new commercial outlets with the traditional subsidized units. Various scenes show activists consulting with the larger tenant body about the plan, organizing and attending meetings, and testifying as to why they are involved. Ruby Wood stresses that stores within the project and job opportunities will help Regent integrate into the community. At a meeting, one unidentified woman argues, 'The invisible wall which surrounds the Park must be torn down and a brand new image be made into a reality. For once we can say, "We live in Regent Park" and not be ashamed to say it.' Some of the most poignant scenes show the palpable frustrations of activists as they are stonewalled in their earnest efforts by the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority and Toronto mayor, June Rowlands. The mayor misses an important meeting with the redevelopment committee and the home-made lasagna that residents had prepared for the gathering sits uneaten on a table. The sense of let-down on the part of activists is palpable as they express their anger and frustration.

Talking heads from the past and present are used at various points in the narrative. Historical footage shows reformers such as Dr Albert Rose, a prime mover behind Regent Park and a long-time housing researcher and appointed official in Toronto, extolling the virtues of urban renewal and public housing and then later coyly regretting their efforts at social engineering. One of the recurring 'experts' interviewed is former reform mayor of Toronto and long-time housing activist, John Sewell. He explains that, 'It's the planners who are to blame for this being such a difficult community to live in. No one feels connected to anything. [Regent] cuts you off from anything that surrounds it.' He goes on to say that since nobody knows who is in control of public space, it is usurped by drug

dealers. Modifying physical form to modify behaviour is the only solution, he concludes.

One of the most remarkable scenes of the documentary actually comes near the beginning. In a suitably postmodern twist on representing the represented, the film-makers shoot a scene of a local Toronto television station reporting in the project. Speaking from one of the internal streets of the project, the reporter comments on the crime rates, the drug problem and the lack of jobs. Then he interviews a woman, who argues sharply,

They should get the truth before they start reporting. I was watching it at home and it made me angry. The dark-haired reporter saying that we're 'ridden'. We're not 'ridden'! Where's the shooting going on in Regent Park if we're so ridden? Where's the drug dealing going on right now. It's not that bad. Yes, we do have it bad in the Park. But it's outsiders coming into the Park. We're not bad. I love living in Regent Park. I'm raising my kids in Regent Park, I'm raising my grandchildren in Regent Park. You've been in the Park, have you been shot yet?

A raucous debate follows between the tenants gathered on the street about the problems of the project with one woman focusing on poverty and another arguing that these problems are everywhere, showing the contested nature of the causes of stigmatization among tenants. Unfortunately, this sense of debate among tenants and alternative arguments about the problems of project living (e.g. media stigmatization, poverty) is never revisited in the documentary. From then on, the focus is on how physical redevelopment will transform the project.

*Return to Regent Park* offers a more stylish and less preachy look at Regent Park than *Farewell to Oak Street*. Its inclusion of the voices of the tenants themselves is a welcome addition to the documentary form. However, it also (unintentionally) produces a damning characterization of the homes, neighbourhood and residents of Regent Park by what it focuses on and what it omits. Drugs and crime, for example, are not discussed in any kind of social or historical context. As in its predecessor, the viewer gets little sense of the whys. Why are public housing residents so poor? Why does Regent Park have a drug problem? Many of the socio-economic and ideological developments that have shaped material misery and driven a minority of residents to drug dealing and anti-social behaviour in public housing are never discussed in the film. Yet it is in this context of bitter despair that we need to place the widely publicized rise in violence and drugs in the project and elsewhere in the 1990s (Ferguson and Lavalette, 1999; Ferguson et al., 2002; Purdy, 2003b). As the state increasingly cut funding and programmes, material deprivation intensified, and a related increase in hard drug dealing has plagued the project. Drug dealers, many of whom live outside the project, have sunk roots in the project (Gillmor, 1996), providing much-needed monetary and social benefits to young people with no futures. Despite the long-standing propensity of the Toronto

media to sensationalize and blow crime figures out of proportion, particularly in regard to public housing, it is apparent that the problems of violence and drugs had increased to worrying proportions for many tenants in the early 1990s. The film leaves us with no explanation for this, lending credence to the common-sense idea that tenants themselves are individually responsible.

The image of criminality in the project, increasingly racialized in the 1980s and 1990s, was nevertheless always more powerful than the reality. Social geographers have demonstrated the powerful spatial associations of racialized representations, which link race, crime and neighbourhood. They have argued persuasively that racialized depictions of minority groups and criminality are enhanced when linked with certain identifiable places (Jackson, 1993, 1994; Pfeifer, 1998). This is only hinted at in *Return to Regent Park* when one of the (largely white) activists in the redevelopment committee claims that the 'multicultural' atmosphere of the project has impeded the establishment of law and order due to the fears of the police of being labelled racist. The film otherwise neglects the lengthy history of tensions between black tenants and the police, which has centred on allegations of police brutality and other forms of unfair 'racialized' policing (*Toronto Star*, 2002). As numerous studies of police culture have commented, many police officers perceive certain parts of the 'public' to be their enemy, especially those populations labelled as problematic and dangerous – the poor, communities of colour and ethnic minorities (Websdale, 2001: ch. 6). The activists cited in the film complained of a lack of security in the project and police ineffectiveness in patrolling the project. We are not told that this same group of tenants has persistently lobbied for a firmer police presence based on a mix of 'hard-nosed zero tolerance' and 'community policing' with extensive foot patrols, an approach that has put it at odds with many black tenants (Jim Ward Associates, 1996). Indeed, frustration with the police had reached an explosive boiling point by the mid-1990s. It came as little surprise that soon after social assistance rates were savagely chopped by 21.6 percent by the Ontario Conservative government in 1995, pent-up frustration with police brutality and desperation with living conditions led to a riot against police in Regent Park involving several hundred residents and 100 police officers (Gillmor, 1996). Yvonne Beasley, mother of Sydney Hemmings, a young black man murdered in the project on 5 July 2001, angrily expressed these frustrations when confronting the police in a public forum: 'My question to you is, how exactly do the youth of Regent Park trust the police in the neighbourhood, when all it is to them is niggers killing niggers?' (CBC, 3 June 2002). *Return to Regent Park* gives us little sense of the tensions and frustrations lying beneath the surface of daily life in the project in the early 1990s.

The frequent resort to juxtaposing historical archival footage of urban planners from the 1950s and 1960s with contemporary 'experts' to show up the 'naiveté of the past' (Rabinowitz, 1993: 133) also implicitly comes down on the side of the new 'experts' without acknowledging that they too have their own political axe to grind. Structural deterioration of the buildings has been a mainstay of recent criticism but the housing form and site design of Regent Park have long been the target of academic and popular criticism. Almost all commentary on the built environment of the project highlights the 'ugliness' of the buildings, the unsuitability of high-rises for children, the segregation of the development from the surrounding neighbourhood and the lack of individually definable and private space within the project. Much of this criticism takes as its starting point Jane Jacobs' 1961 book, *Life and Death of Great American Cities*, which argues that urban design elements themselves can enable healthy and safe social interaction by providing spaces that encourage natural meetings and other friendly interactions. She believed that modernist planning, especially public housing projects, had destroyed this 'natural' urban fabric (Jacobs, 1964: Introduction). Robert Fulford seconds Jacobs, writing that the state 'created an enclave with its own style and rules' that pegged residents as 'second-class citizens' (1995: 27–8). *Toronto Star* reporter, Christian Cotroneo, describes Regent Park as sprawling 'in all its Soviet sameness, flanked by anonymous apartment blocks' (Cotroneo, 2002). John Sewell, makes similar arguments to Fulford and Cotroneo but explicitly draws on the 'defensible space' theories of Oscar Newman and Alice Coleman to argue that modernist design features themselves, such as the lack of privately definable space, the high numbers of dwellings that use a single entrance, high-rise buildings in general and the absence of 'defensible space' have themselves caused anti-social behaviour, encouraged deviancy and undermined community (Sewell, 1994: 149–51; see also Coleman, 1985; Newman, 2003). The only solution to Regent Park's problems, these authors conclude, is wholesale redevelopment of the built environment to create safe and orderly communities.

Such arguments, echoed in the Regent Park redevelopment proposal discussed in the film, tread dangerously close to the same 'environmental determinism' of post-war planners and the state. Physical form does influence human life and behaviour but it cannot be treated as an independent phenomenon or factor. As Edward Soja writes:

. . . these physicalist methodologies are fixed too exclusively on the formal properties of materialized spatial configurations, giving too little attention to the complex social forces that exist behind their appearance. . . . When looking at social phenomena, therefore, physical space matters a great deal, but the spatiality of social life extends far beyond physical forms and directly measurable surface appearances. (2001)

Environmental determinist arguments not only deflect attention away from the wider socio-economic problems of poor project dwellers, they discourage, as Keith Jacobs and Tony Manzi argue, 'new possibilities and alternative visions' to deal with the crisis of affordable housing (1998: 170).

It also stretches belief to argue, as John Sewell has done in the film and in numerous other venues, that the problems of crime in public housing can be solved by mere changes to the built environment. Design changes making it less easy for drug dealers to hide or escape from the police, or to integrate living with public spaces may enhance some tenants' sense of well being, but it does nothing to deal with the root problems of economic misery, which fuel the drug trade and other security concerns. As Soja again puts it eloquently:

Such studies are particularly subject to another pitfall, a territorial fallacy whereby the space analyzed is made into an island unto itself, disconnected from the wider urban milieu, so what appears as a successful reduction of crime in one area may merely be its displacement to another area. Equally troublesome, the discovery of a statistical link between design and crime rates, or other such close correlations between physical form and behavior, is often exploded into ever broadening concepts of design determinism and all-encompassing superficial spatial theories of the city, overlooking the possibility that the discovered linkage or correlation is itself the product of other social and spatial forces operating to shape urban life. Here again, surface appearances and configurations become highly deceptive, especially perhaps when they prove superficially useful. (2001)

Soja's last sentence is perceptive: 'defensible space' arguments seek superficial shortcuts to deeper structural and governmental inadequacies and are therefore applauded by state officials unwilling to adequately invest in jobs and education. David Harvey makes a similar point in arguing that such general design approaches falsely contend, 'that the shaping of spatial order can be the foundation for a new moral and aesthetic order' (Harvey cited in Marcuse, 2000) bringing us back to the authoritarian utopianism of 1950s urban renewal.

The failed Regent Park redevelopment scheme discussed in the film, and a more comprehensive plan launched in 2002 and ratified by government authorities in 2003, is centrally bound up with questions of reforming 'underclass' populations through 'community building'. The use of the term 'community' in the discourse of housing reform has been largely consistent from the 1940s through the 1990s. It 'presumes that sharing a physical space produces a common culture; however when there are only very poor people living together, a culture of poverty is produced' (Smith, 1998: 50). Physical redesign and the social 'mixing' of poor project dwellers and professional middle classes who want to live in the city centre are intended to reform the 'deviant' cultures of the poor, generating new

and positive attitudes towards work, harmonious social relations and crime- and drug-free neighbourhoods. The real emphasis here is on changing tenants themselves and not government social and economic policies that have generated problems in the project. What it does, Janet L. Smith succinctly argues, is 'clean up' public housing 'by sweeping out the poor' and 'justifying funding cuts without addressing systemic problems' (Smith, 1998). Certainly Regent Park needs substantial renovations due to the ageing buildings and infrastructure. Improving design may be worthwhile but it does not provide jobs or adequate funding for local schools. Nor does it tackle police brutality against black youth. These are the key reasons for socio-economic marginalization and it is this lack of power in society that leads to the often exaggerated but nevertheless real anti-social and harmful behaviour that is wrapped up with drugs and violence. In *Return to Regent Park*, we are told that redevelopment may promise a sense of stability and social order in a time of rapid socio-economic change. Yet it also 'serves to legitimize the ideological shift presenting the problems of housing as attributable to individuals rather than a failure of government' as Jacobs and Manzi argue for the similar British case (Jacobs and Manzi, 1998: 167–8).

## Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate that a better understanding of a documentary film in historical context can be reached using an interdisciplinary perspective. From film criticism and studies, we may utilize the particular technical language and textual analysis of cinema. Historical research can throw light on the context of a film's production, reception and its sociological point of view. Geographical analyses enable us to comprehend the powerful spatial representations embedded in films and to understand the geographies of 'real' space in which films are set.

*Farewell to Oak Street* meshed neatly with the housing reform, social work philosophy and media attitudes of the 1940s and 1950s, which prescribed that the poor needed to live in 'efficient' and 'harmonious' communities purportedly like the rest of society. The film envisioned that this desired homogeneity and social cohesion could only obtain within a profoundly middle-class paradigm of private family life and responsible conduct in line with the social order. Neither the NFB nor public housing observers ventured structural explanations for the social problems of poor families, such as unstable employment, pitiful social services, a biased educational system, and sheer lack of socio-economic opportunities for those falling outside the accepted norms of suitable family and social life such as single parents. In the tumultuous post-war social and economic context, however, the scientific legitimacy of liberal modernization plans

and the popular saliency of 'realist' documentary film ensured that it sold well to the public. In this respect, Paula Rabinowitz's argument that, 'Documentary films provide a stability to an ever-changing reality, freezing the images for later instructional use' (1993: 120–21) is particularly pertinent. The 'visual ideological' arguments in *Farewell to Oak Street* helped paint a nefarious portrait of the inner-city poor that would be used for two decades to bolster the arguments of the urban renewal movement.

In contrast with its 1953 counterpart, *Return to Regent Park* allows some residents of Regent Park to speak themselves directly about their problems and hopes for the future. Nevertheless, its steadfast concentration on the physical design deficiencies of the project provides only a very partial understanding of the problems that tenants face. Lacking any sense of social, economic and political context concerning why Regent Park and its residents were territorially stigmatized, the documentary leaves the viewer with the impression that marginalization stems largely from the individual problems of tenants themselves. Moreover, we get little indication in the film that tenants contested this stigmatization in various ways. The film, therefore, unwittingly assists in the social construction of the project as an 'outcast space', contributing to the damning social and economic exclusion faced by project dwellers.

## Notes

This article was first presented at the International Geographical Union Conference, Commission on the Cultural Approach in Geography, Rio de Janeiro, June 2003. The author would like to thank conference participants and organizer, Mauricio Abreu, the editors of *Media, Culture & Society*, Bryan D. Palmer and Richard Harris for helpful suggestions. Special thanks to Philip Alperson, Richard Immerman and members of the Department of History at Temple University for a welcoming and stimulating intellectual atmosphere.

1. A list of all NFB films dealing with urban issues over a period of 50 years can be found at the NFB English Language Collections Website, Urbanism – Housing and Public Housing, [www.nfb.ca](http://www.nfb.ca) (consulted 10 November 2003).

2. 'Evangelistic' was the word used to describe the efforts of the reformers of the period by one of their leading members, Humphrey Carver, in his memoirs (Carver, 1978: 82). For a fuller treatment, see Purdy (2002: ch. 6).

3. It is important to emphasize that Regent Park residents were not ill-fated spectators of their own futures or empty recipients of the ideological messages conveyed by outside critics. Stigmatization was contested at all levels over the years (see Purdy, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).

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