

Modernization and Documentary Film in the Americas

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Abstract

Historians and other scholars have recognized the centrality of visuality and images to the modernization theory that drove US policy in the Global South during the Cold War. However, these scholars have so far failed to take into account the process of creating and consuming images and how that process shaped popular and expert ideas of what modernization would look like. Focusing primarily on efforts in Latin America, my book will trace the complex interplay between documentary filmmaking and international development institutions and agencies formed during and in the decades after World War II. This report traces the convergence of economic development and documentary film by examining some of the 1940s productions of Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), as well as some Rockefeller Foundation agricultural films of the early 1960s. In particular, it looks at a few films made by director Willard Van Dyke, who was trained in the New Deal documentary tradition and went on to make films for both the OCIAA and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Modernization and Documentary Film in the Americas

Scholars who chronicle and critique 20th century modernization and development have recognized the centrality of images to the modernization theory that drove US policy in the Global South during the Cold War. Nick Cullather argues that modernization theorists understood development as a “process of creating and consuming images” in order to imagine, project, and imitate particular idealized futures.¹ Similarly, Arturo Escobar writes that development facilitated the “emergence into visibility” of particular social groups, such as peasants and, later, women. Most famously, James Scott, in his book *Seeing Like a State*, argues forcefully that theorists and planners often thought about modernity in terms of visual order. Scholars recognize the importance of visuality and visibility in their accounts of modernization theory and development practice, and a few draw on film and photography to illustrate their points about how modernization was meant to work. However, still and moving images are generally treated as reflections of modernization theories and practices, rather than works that were produced by people and institutions, that circulated in the world, and that influenced the thinking of those who viewed them.² My book project, “The Development Film in the Americas,” will attempt to fill this gap, charting the rise and circulation of documentary films as tools for envisioning, fomenting, and explaining the principles of international development.

Various collections at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) are pivotal to this study. In the 1940s, the key decade when visual representations of underdevelopment and development solidified into a recognizable repertoire of images and narratives, documentary film was a relatively new form. It emerged from the genres of early “actualities,” the health film (which the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and affiliated organizations were particularly key players in pioneering), the industrial film, and the travelogue, but also represented something distinct in its often political or constructive purpose. Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term “documentary” in his 1926 review of Robert and Frances Flaherty’s Samoa film *Moana*, and the form was from then

on associated with ethnographic portrayals of cultures that were allegedly on the verge of eradication by the forces of modernity. But midcentury development and documentary shaped one another, particularly as each became a significant force in US foreign policy: documentary helped experts and ordinary people imagine development, while development also changed the documentary form, giving it new shape, purpose, and conventions. Both the OCIAA and the Rockefeller Foundation played pivotal roles in bringing film to the forefront as a key technology to promote modernization in the emerging Third World.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many in the cohort of filmmakers who made Cold War development films got their start in the milieu of New Deal documentary artists.³ In accordance with David Ekbladh's sense of the continuity between New Deal and international development thinking, some of the postwar development regime's key propagandists were US filmmakers and photographers whose first jobs as artists were in New Deal documentary projects, making images of the deserving poor in order to justify social insurance programs.⁴ However, development also looked different from the New Deal, particularly in its emphasis on thoroughgoing cultural transformation of its objects. If, as Gary Gerstle contends, American progressivism focused on cultural assimilation and New Deal liberalism attempted to secure economic progress and well-being for citizens without thinking much about culture. The development ethos that followed would synthesize "culture" and "economy," calling for the rapid transformation of everyone, everywhere into an approximation of an American ideal of a modern subject, who could think for himself, build community, strive happily, and in so doing climb triumphantly out of poverty.⁵

One key location of this merging of "culture" and "economy" was in official US cultural programming.⁶ Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs was crucial to the emergence of this new kind of film, which extended the war's battleground to the Americas, in order to make the case for the urgency of the extraction of Latin American resources.⁷ The impoverished masses of the Third World were not, according to modernization theory's mandate, doomed by biology; rather, they were virtuous victims of their own superstition and lethargy who could, with help from modernizing interventions, be freed to

pursue a life of productive work and self-improvement. RAC film and textual documents not only demonstrate how this ideology was given life by the artists at Rockefeller's fledgling agency in the 1940s, but also provide a record of the concrete ways OCIAA film programming influenced the Rockefeller Foundation, UNESCO, and USIA media efforts, and even the thinking of modernization theorists, in subsequent decades. This ideology was worked out among scientists, artists, and foundation, government, and UN officials in revealing ways: sometimes the filmmaker's need for melodrama or diplomatic imperatives conflicted with scientific accuracy. An examination of these films' conflictual and contingent production allows us to see the pieces from which a seemingly coherent modernization imaginary was constructed, but also to glimpse how it might have been formulated differently.

International development and cultural propaganda converged during World War II because of the ambitions and interests of Nelson Rockefeller, and their sudden convergence with the ambitions and interests of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Rockefeller's interest in Latin America was initially sparked on a 1933 trip to Cuba and Mexico, where he was fascinated by the art he encountered. It was this interest in art, along with his family connections, which led him to join the board of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), and then to be named president of the museum in 1939.⁸ Two years earlier, he joined the board of the Creole Petroleum Corporation, a Venezuelan affiliate of Standard Oil, and visited Venezuela. There, as he remembers, he "became very interested in the problems of the company in relation to community—its impact on the economic life of the country and its relationship and responsibility to the social life of the country."⁹ In particular, he observed US businessmen and their families not learning Spanish, showing disdain for local people, and ignoring the culture and institutions around them. He approached the heads of major corporations, but they were focused on their European operations and thus had no time or interest to sign onto a hemispheric public relations program.¹⁰

Rockefeller had more luck with the president. In 1940, he approached Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins with a new idea, giving Hopkins a memo proposing a massive program of economic cooperation between the United States and the other countries of the hemisphere. The plan, which Rockefeller had formulated in

collaboration with brain-truster economist Beardsley Ruml, mentions culture only as an aside, claiming that “the main lines of a cultural program are fairly obvious.”¹¹ However, Roosevelt latched onto this part of the memo, asking Rockefeller to found and head up his massive cultural program rather than the primarily economic one he had envisioned. Roosevelt was correct that Rockefeller was better prepared to run a cultural program; he had contacts in Hollywood and with artists from his role at MoMA, and had also been instrumental in pushing the Rockefeller Foundation to invest in educational and health films. Two arms of the foundation, the General Education Board (GEB) and the RF’s Humanities Division, had been instrumental in making the nationwide distribution and screening of educational films into a widespread and somewhat profitable phenomenon, particularly after a University of Chicago study financed by the foundation concluded that film was uniquely effective as an educational tool. With his brother Laurance, Nelson had pushed the GEB in 1937 to acquire an educational film company, arguing that the field of educational film was a burgeoning and potentially lucrative one, but also that directly shaping that field as it expanded would protect an unsuspecting audience from nefarious actors and the propaganda they might produce. After a fight, GEB officials voted down the acquisition, but did begin issuing grants to universities for the production of educational films.¹²

When the OCIAA began to produce enough documentary films to imagine distinct categories for distribution, “development” was not among the categories listed, as it would be in USIA films during the Cold War and especially in the 1960s. However, the multiple aims of development begin to cohere in a few of the films, as well as in a pamphlet created by the OCIAA’s Don Francisco in 1945, which reads:

The primary aim of the OCIAA’s Film Division is to improve the health of the people in Central and South American countries. Its further purpose is to create wants among these people, the satisfaction of which will serve to raise the standard of living.¹³

Development, during the war, was still largely something that happened to economies rather than cultures and people; this latter usage, along with the idea

that individual consciousness needed to shift before the economy could, became commonplace by the end of the 1940s. Instead, categories included “Interdependence,” “Permanence of OCIAA’s Objectives,” and “American Nations Act as Equals.” While many of the films featured scenes of resource extraction and plant science, and at least one featured the trope of the “awakening” region that would soon become much more common, it was only in a few of the films, that “development” emerged as an all-encompassing category with a different usage than in the prewar years, imagined not primarily as an achievement of economic policy, but rather as a personal transformation into a modern subject.¹⁴

A 1946 report for the Rockefeller Foundation, by MoMA film department curator Iris Barry, characterized the majority of OCIAA films for US audiences as “amateurish and feeble travelogs... of low technical quality as to photography but more particularly as to editorial construction.”¹⁵ Julien Bryan’s *Americans All* was one of the best-known examples of this showcasing of Pan-American diversity and modernity, beginning with the opening line “Here are some Americans you’ve never heard of” and panning over faces and landscapes to convey a sense of the variety, and the varying modernities, to be found in the Americas. Although she was kinder to the Disney films for Latin American audiences, one of the only documentary films Barry excluded from this category and lavishly praised was *The Bridge*, a film directed by Willard Van Dyke and written by Ben Maddow, both of whom were trained in the New Deal documentary milieu. The film reaches back into the social-protest mode of the 1930s, combining it with a newly straightforward enthusiasm for progress in order to establish a blueprint and a language for later modernization assumptions. In a note contextualizing the report, Barry argued that most wartime films “were not in the progressive, socially conscious tradition of documentary proper at all” but rather “win-the-war propaganda or technical training pictures.”¹⁶ In emphasizing these distinctions, Barry helped to solidify them and elevate films like *The Bridge* into representatives of a proper, constructive and dramatic documentary tradition.

In its attempt to promote resource extraction and industrialization, *The Bridge* borrows the urgent iconography and tone from antifascist war films. The opening moments depict a calm seascape, while the film’s voiceover proclaims “The sun is rising over a battlefield. Over the Atlantic Ocean. Beyond the horizon lie other

battlefields: Europe, and Asia. The sun moves west, toward the two Americas.” Having designated the entire, ostensibly calm ocean a battleground, this opening implicitly extends the battle to the Americas as well as Europe. The film quickly shifts to a new Manichean binary, panning over the ruins at Machu Picchu while claiming that “The new civilization of South America lives and works and trades with the rest of the world. Turning her back on these symbols of the past, she looks to Europe and North America.” The “battlefield” on which the film opens thus extends not only to the antifascist fight everywhere, but also, more importantly in the film, to the battle between “the symbols of the past” and the “work and trade” of the future. Through an abrupt cut later on, the film links the fate of a small, disheveled girl - “What will her life become?” - to the extraction of the continent’s natural resources, as the close-up of the girl dissolves into shots of dynamite blasts and spark-filled refineries.

In the middle of their experience filming *The Bridge*, as they traversed the continent from Venezuela to Chile, Van Dyke and Maddow stopped in Colombia to make another film, *The Silent War*, about a Rockefeller Foundation yellow fever vaccination project.¹⁷ This 1943 film serves as a useful contrast to *The Bridge* and the development films that come later. While it clearly employs war as a metaphor for the struggle against disease, *The Silent War* is not a development film. Rather, it maintains the pre-development, Good Neighbor-policy-inflected sense that people, even villagers, can adopt new amenities and technologies without being entirely transformed. In the film, the people in a small Colombian town hear that a yellow fever vaccine, “the product of the genius of the combined Americas,” has finally arrived. The villagers line up to receive their vaccines, without any superstitions being vanquished. In fact, the film mentions neither lethargy nor tradition, making it quite clear that the scourges to be eradicated are disease and fascism. The State Department cleared *Silent War* for showing, although it worried that “insufficient material pertaining to the prosperous and progressive phases of Colombia is shown,” and thus the film’s screening should be restricted to the United States. This diversity of films, the willingness to accept that ‘villagers’ may not be superstitious and closed-off to outsiders but rather may simply lack resources, characterized much of the Good Neighbor film output and demonstrates that modernization theory might have evolved without such a

strong emphasis on cultural transformation.

However, it was the more dramatic and personal message of *The Bridge* and films like it that would come to dominate documentary culture in the 1950s. and 1960s. The OCIAA and the Rockefeller Foundation experiments had a profound influence on CREFAL, UNESCO head Jaime Torres Bodet's project on Cardenas' old estate in Pátzcuaro, Mexico—Torres Bodet cited the OCIAA as an important influence, and Rockefeller Foundation staff people worked closely with Torres Bodet and others in setting up CREFAL.¹⁸ Film and media were central to CREFAL's mission and method of fundamental education, in which development workers from all over Latin America were trained in film production and techniques for interactive screening. CREFAL's methods throughout the 1950s, alongside educational film efforts by the Rockefeller Foundation, enjoyed substantial circulation both within and beyond Mexico.¹⁹

After the war, Van Dyke, who was “greylisted” in the 1950s by the US government despite his lifelong disdain for communism, alternated between working on corporate educational films and agricultural documentaries. He made two of the Rockefeller Foundation's most highly acclaimed films, depicting the enormous agricultural projects it was undertaking in Mexico (*Harvest*, 1961) and in Asia (*Rice*, 1964), projects which, as Tore Olsson has recently written, “staggering” consequences “both for Mexico and the planet as a whole.”²⁰ Both films circulated widely and were shown in schools and educational film libraries and classrooms around the country. The films generally mixed an interest in accurately documenting the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation's agricultural program, both successful and unsuccessful, with a will to conform to a developmental narrative that led from stagnation to striving and agricultural bounty. On Van Dyke's script for *Harvest*, someone from the RF added the line that Mexico people were “chained to the soil by a primitive agriculture,” a line which stayed in the film. *Harvest* was one of the featured listings in the *New York Times*' anticipatory writeup of “the finals of the American Film Festival.” Even among “a mammoth display of the best non-theatrical film fare of 1961” in “the biggest, best-organized and most influential 16-mm conclave in the world,” *Harvest* stood out as what reviewer Howard Thompson called “a towering documentary, scholarly,

enlightening, and entertaining, which succinctly records the Rockefeller Foundation's long-range program of assistance in Latin America"²¹

Rice, too, was shown widely in educational settings and mostly acclaimed, though it was criticized for its disparaging of traditional cultivation methods. Reviewer Eugene Knez complained of the narration that constantly criticized traditional and indigenous practices, arguing that "except for some excellent footage showing the rice terraces of the Ifugao, there is no mention of the impressive folk sophistication regarding rice cultivation."²² Despite these potential inaccuracies, Rockefeller Foundation botanist Paul Mangelsdorf showed *Rice* to his students at Harvard, who in post-film questionnaires almost uniformly found it extremely accurate and educational. A similar melding of educational experiment and development propaganda, this time in a more melodramatic and triumphalist key, was displayed in Van Dyke's 1962 film for CBS *So That Men are Free*, depicting the Vicos, Peru experiment, in which Cornell University anthropologists and the RAND corporation bought a Peruvian village and attempted to modernize it and document that modernization process. This was typical of the changes in modernization theory and propaganda during the 1960s. Capitalist development became a more urgent Cold War objective in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Particularly, as the United States escalated the Vietnam War, its dream of the thoroughgoing transformation of villages and societies could increasingly be articulated in shorthand, breezing over the details and agricultural puzzles the early Rockefeller films had painstakingly sketched and fought over.

The influence of the social documentary style exemplified by Van Dyke's films on the development projects of the 1950s and 1960s thus goes beyond simply the projects in which they were involved. Wartime films like *The Bridge*, many of which were made and distributed by the OCIAA and interconnected with its remit of economic integration, were key in establishing an iconography and narrative form for modernization and development: for helping people the world over recognize what underdevelopment looked like and decide that global modernization was necessary, possible, and urgent.

¹Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) 160.

² See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2007); Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). A few works do consider documentary films, though generally reading them as evidence of development ideology, rather than considering the dynamics of their production or circulation: see Cullather, *Hungry World*; Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty In Common: Community Action During the American Century*; and Sheyda Jahanbani, "'Across the Ocean, Across the Tracks': Imagining Global Poverty in Cold War America," *Journal of American Studies* 48:4 (2014) 937-974.

³ Apart from those discussed here, other key New-Deal-to-Development filmmakers and photographers include Gordon Parks, John Collier Jr, and Jack Delano.

⁴ David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵ Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *American Historical Review* 99:4 (Oct., 1994) 1043-1073.

⁶ For a persuasive account of the Roosevelt administration's deliberate attempts to merge cultural and economic policy in Latin America, see Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of US Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. ch. 1.

⁷ These films found key subjects and audiences in 1940s and 1950s Mexico. Although a few other regions, particularly British colonies in Africa, constituted important sites for the emergence of development communications, Mexico occupied a privileged role in development discourse and practice: US planners and social scientists imagined Mexico's poor-yet-modernizing villages as perfect laboratories for agricultural policy innovations, while also seeing the institutionalization of its revolution as an opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties. The Mexican state, for its part, sought US resources and propaganda in the 1940s and 1950s in its quest to reduce domestic spending while extending itself, and thus national consciousness, into the lives of everyday people, particularly in rural areas. See Rosaleen Smyth, "Film as Instrument of Modernization and Social Change in Africa: The Long View" in Bloom, Miescher, and Manuh (eds.), *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); Cullather, *Hungry World*; Fein, "Everyday Forms."

⁸ Nelson Rockefeller, "Notes by Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller," (Nov 16, 1959) 2 Personal Papers of Nelson A. Rockefeller, RG III 4E, Box 48, Folder 403, RAC. This story has been told before by Darlene Rivas and others, but I retell it here in a way that emphasizes the convergence of economic and film policy. See Rivas, *Missionary Capitalist: Nelson Rockefeller in Venezuela* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nelson A. Rockefeller, "Hemisphere Economic Policy" (June 1940). RG III 4O, Nelson Rockefeller Personal Papers, Box 6, Folder 44, RAC.

¹² Victoria Cain, "'An Indirect Influence Upon Industry': Rockefeller Philanthropies and the Development of Educational Film in the United States, 1935-1953," in Orgeron and Streible, *Learning With the Lights Off*, 230-48.

¹³ Don Francisco, *The Education Motion Picture Field* (1945) 11, Office of the Messrs Rockefeller Series E, Cultural Interests, Box 12, Folder 127, RAC.

¹⁴ Another development film circulated by the OCIAA was *The Amazon Awakens* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1944).

¹⁵ Iris Barry, "Observations on the American Documentary Film in Wartime," 1946, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Projects, RG 1.1, Series 200R, Box 246, Folder 2943, RAC.

¹⁶ Iris Barry to John Marshall, May 22, 1946, Rockefeller Foundation Projects, RG 1.1, Series 200R, Box 246, Folder 2943, RAC.

¹⁷ Willard Van Dyke, unpublished memoir., Willard Van Dyke Personal Papers, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona.

¹⁸ Torres Bodet (then Minister of Public Instruction, Mexico) to Nelson A. Rockefeller, July 29, 1944. "It was a pleasure for me to receive Miss Eleanor Clark, who gave me your kind letter of June 22nd, informing me of the very fine projects of your Office in connection with films for popular instruction that are being produced by your divisions of Health and Sanitation, Education, and Motion Pictures in collaboration with the Disney studios." Edward D'Arms likewise notes that "several of the officers of the Foundation have had the opportunity to become personally acquainted with this program" and offers to "assist CREFAL with one or two top anthropologists." D'Arms to Mr. F.G. Friedmann (Aug 25, 1952) Rockefeller Foundation Archives, RG 2, General Correspondence – 1952, Series 100, Box 7, Folder 41, RAC.

¹⁹ See Molly Geidel, "Cinemas and Spectators of International Development," *European Journal of American Studies* 14.4, online journal accessed 5 May 2020. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15440> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15440>.

²⁰ Olsson, *Agrarian Crossings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) 99.

²¹ Howard Thompson, "Current Screen Entries in 16 mm," *New York Times* (March 11, 1962) x7.

²² Eugene I. Knez, "Rice," *American Anthropologist* 68:5 (Oct 1966) 1328-9.