On 23 August 1953, American film writer Arthur Knight, currently serving as a programmer for the Ford-sponsored TV show *Omnibus*, penned an enthusiastic personal letter to Paul Rotha and Basil Wright commending their recently released film, *World Without End*. 'Unquestionably,' he wrote, 'it is the most important, most exciting documentary of all the postwar era. Never before has the work of the United Nations and its agencies been made to seem so urgent and important.'

and Basil Wright were involved on an ongoing basis with UNESCO until the late 1960s. Rotha and Wright's film production company, International Realist, was formed in order to field contracts from the UN when Grierson first took up the post.[5] Rotha and Wright also sat on a number of UNESCO committees and made conference presentations on UNESCO's film work at the Edinburgh Film Festival, among other places.[6] As late as 1967, Wright penned a UNESCO mission report on the development of a Ugandan film unit.

For the film-makers, this film was part of a trajectory of sponsored work about global issues. From the melancholic Orientalism and sophisticated contrapuntal sound of his best-known film, *The Song of Ceylon* (1934), Wright was a strong supporter of what he called development media.[7] Rotha, one of the documentary film movement's most energetic chroniclers, made a series of 'world'-themed films, first for the British Ministry of Information during the war with *World of Plenty* (1943), followed afterwards by *The World is Rich* (1947) and ending with the production of the BBC television series, *The World is Ours* (1954).[8] *World Without End* clearly fits into the trajectory traced by Rotha from wartime British documentaries to international development. As Jack Ellis has put it, '*World Without End* ... was the last big brave representation of internationalism from the old Griersonians.'[9] But how similar were the earlier films with this UNESCO film? I begin by examining the film's connection to Rotha's work for the British state. In the sections that follow I examine the conflicting messages about development and the global village encapsulated by *World Without End*. I conclude with some reflections on the influence of the emergence of television on the technological internationalism of the global film genre, of which *World Without End* is a particularly good example.

World of Plenty and *The World is Rich*

World Without End merits comparison with two earlier films by Rotha, *World of Plenty* and *The World is Rich*, an exercise that highlights both continuity and difference in the transition from national to international sponsorship. Both *World of Plenty* and

John Boyd Orr, Scottish nutritional scientist and inaugural Direct General of the UN Food and Agricultural organisation. Courtesy of BFI

Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). While *World of Plenty* focuses on the devastation of the natural disasters of flood and drought during the depression era, the dominant disaster in *The World is Rich* is the inhuman violence wrought by war. The dropping of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima is given particular attention and the famine in India that follows, both chronologically and in the film, is represented almost as a cosmic retribution for such an unthinkably violent act.

John Orr, whose inter-war research had been heavily backed by the Empire Marketing Board, provides a commanding presence in both films. In *World of Plenty* he appears as a concerned scientist and public official, often shot directly addressing the camera in close-up with ideas about the new science of nutrition (vitamins!) and the eugenic improvement of the British population even on wartime rations. He appears again in *The World is Rich*, this time as the knighted inaugural director-general of FAO. Orr plays a particularly significant role when, after the end credits have been displayed, he interrupts the film to say that, although it may be the end of the film, it is just the beginning of a great world plan for food.

World of Plenty uses two dominant narrators, one English, one American, to express differences in international attitude towards plans for world food organisation. While the English narrator presents the situation of world food production and distribution, the American constantly interrupts and asks for plainer speech. 'Can't you stop using fancy words?' he implores. 'I'm all confused now.' The two voices, and the relationship between them, which travels over the course of the film from tentative to strongly committed, uses irony to connect the viewer to the film's message. As in *London Can Take It* (Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt, 1940), made for the GPO three years before, the American narrator is deployed to foster credibility for the film's message with an American audience. The film ends with a speech by American vice-president Henry Wallace in which he delivers a message about the century of the common man in which 'there can be no privileged people'.

World of Plenty is formally innovative in the multiplicity of narrators that it uses; indeed the multi-vocal aspect of the film becomes a distinctive structuring device.[10] Beyond the two main voices, there is also an Englishwoman's voiceover heard when maternal and child health is being discussed. This strategy was to be repeated and expanded in *The World is Rich* which uses no less than seven voices, one of the most notable of which is a man with a Caribbean accent who adds an ironic tone to the discussion of the modernisation and mechanisation of farm work in the name of efficiency. Who will find jobs for all those displaced workers, he wonders. Where the earlier film ended with a speech by Wallace, this post-war film features excerpts from a speech by Fiorello Enrico La Guardia, the long-serving mayor of New York, now director-general of UNRRA, before giving the last word to Sir Orr.

Both films hold the unfettered marketplace to account for the ills and injustices of the world and, through cross-cutting and voiceover, draw direct connections between

plenty in one location and want in another. In one hard-hitting sequence in *The World is Rich*, for instance, an image of a plump hog is shown before one of a starving person. The

1949 essay, 'A New Kind of Country', published in his collection, *America and Cosmic Man*. Lewis writes, 'now ... the earth has become one big village, with telephones laid on from one end to the other, and air transport, both speedy and safe'.[12] As directed by their producers at UNESCO, in *World Without End* Wright and Rotha took this small world concept and the universal humanist sensibility associated with it and welded it to the work of the UN.

The story of the film's production highlights the important role UNESCO played in combining Wright and Rotha's prior experience and perspectives with this new framework. In February 1951, a UN film board meeting with representatives from all the UN agencies determined that a film should be made to reflect the work being done by their constituents. Immediately afterwards, Ross McLean, the head of UNESCO's Films and Visual Information Division, not to mention former Chair of the National Film Board of Canada and another of John Grierson's lieutenants, visited the site of a new fundamental education centre in Patzcuaro, Mexico, sponsored by the Mexican government and the Organisation of American States. The work being done there reflected the agenda of UNESCO to increase literacy and improve techniques pertaining to agriculture and health. Plans were immediately made for film footage to be taken of the centre and its work but no finished film was completed. In the United Nations General Conference of 1951 a resolution was taken to produce a film provisionally titled 'The World is a Village'. A year later, McLean was in talks with one of the best-known documentary film-makers in the world, Basil Wright of International Realist, to create a storyline for a film on the

Man has ever evolved. It is an idea embracing all people everywhere, you and me and these Russians and Chinese and Indians and Africans. Everyone, everywhere.' The point is made exceedingly clear: 'Unless we see the whole world as a kind of village, and try to solve its problems as villagers try to solve their problems between themselves, mankind may well perish.'

Back and forth from Mexico to Thailand

The film utilises a structure suited to its global village theme. Filmed by the two directors simultaneously in the different countries – Wright in Thailand and Rotha in Mexico – it visually links people in developing nations together through the inter-cutting of the two national contexts, but, more to the point of the film, the regional contexts of Latin America and South East Asia, while the narration retains an omniscient (and first-world) point of view.[16] The film opens from the perspective of outer space as we see a spinning globe wreathed in what appears to be cigarette smoke. (An original script idea went further to include a finger stopping the spinning globe at random spots, which the film would then display.) The narrator makes a number of stentorian assertions, 'I am a man myself' and 'we are looking at human beings', which immediately distinguishes the film from Rotha's earlier, more political and playful films (the French title for the film was *Je suis un homme*).

The film's overriding tone is one of ahistorical universalism: problems of health and infrastructure are much the same everywhere, with regional inflections. As Cecile Starr aptly put it in a review published in *Saturday Review*, 'the film leaps like a wild animal from Mexico to Thailand, and back and forth, giving the bewildering impression that people and problems are somewhat alike all round the globe'.[17] There is nothing like the connections between plenty and want made in the 1940s films, largely because the developed world is almost completely absent. Over the course of the film a number of problems relating to health, agriculture and education are exposed and then solved by UN agencies (often with the help of DDT and other herbicidal chemicals). The film ends in a crescendo of positive images. A mobile library bringing 'new ideas and the latest information' to a rural community in Thailand; people in a visual literacy class in Mexico; children learning traditional performance practice in Thailand; shots of temples and statues of Buddha; an elaborately costumed Mexican dance. The children are healed of a disfiguring disease called 'yaws' in Thailand, students trained in fundamental education graduate in Patzcuaro. And suddenly the United Nations headquarters in New York appears for the first time in the film and the village metaphor re-emerges. The narrator says that: 'Now, as the world shrinks, the neighbours are closer together.' Over a montage of children carefully selected to represent different races, the narrator affirms, 'we all live in the same world'. A distressed child's face fades to the globe as ominous music sounds.

Children play an important part in establishing the film's global village tone. Courtesy of BFI

As this brief description shows, the film combines a certain amount of decontextualised particularity with vague universalisms. This sense of disconnection to historical time is partly due to issues that emerged during the film's production. During pre-production the Secretary-General of the UN, Trygve Lie, who, it was intended, would be included giving a speech about the United Nations, tendered his resignation. Ensuing negotiation about the value of keeping the film from dating too quickly resulted in the decision not to include any speeches by UN officials or other politicians. In *World of Plenty* and *The World is Rich*, films made before the widespread appearance of television, the sequences depicting world leaders might be said to contribute to the films' value. In its step away from current events, *World Without End* reflects its provenance in a world where leaders could be seen on TV any night of the week.

Technological internationalism

Nevertheless, television is the hidden subtext of this film. Rotha was himself poised to take on the position of Head of Documentaries at BBC Television (1953–5), where he commissioned *The World is Ours*, a series made in collaboration with the UN. In a book he edited in the mid-1950s, *Television in the Making*, he included a chapter by Henry Cassirer, inaugural head of UNESCO's television service. Not only does Cassirer emphasise that film is the best format on which to transport shows internationally; he also highlights that the offscreen narrator is the 'most feasible and economical way for the adaptation of filmed programmes, provided these do not contain any important lip synch dialogue sequences'.[18] In his view, films made in this style have the greatest potential to take television beyond narrow national frameworks toward international understanding. Thus, despite being shot on film, the form and content of *World Without End* both indicate that it was made with an eye towards television, where, in the event, it did secure distribution.

World Without End reflects its production by an agency attempting to bring about precisely the kind of technologically mediated internationalism that television in its formative years symbolised. While it purports to show connections between things, in this case the plight of villagers in Thailand and Mexico, the very arbitrariness of the examples' connection (their almost random choice and the original idea of a finger pointing to a spinning globe) and the invisibility of the western powers except through the UN edifice, and the very prominent use of both narration and music, makes the story tellingly obscure. *World Without End* is very much embedded in the development discourse that characterised post-war western internationalism and represents an encounter between a new global world order and the perspectives – and contradictions – of the British documentary film movement.

In sum, in *World Without End* we see the internationalism of films made by Wright and Rotha and their compatriots in the context of earlier production at the EMB, GPO and MOI connecting to a highly capitalised and technologised form of modernisation, one attempting to substitute progress for politics. Certainly, the modernisation seen in *World Without End* is presented without the distinctive commentaries suffused with complex layers of melancholy and irony found in some of the earlier British-made films. Indeed, it conveys its ideas with an excessive earnestness at times, despite McLean's

warning. In part this reflects the shift to secondary students as the imagined audience for non-theatrical cinema in the 1950s and the need for translated voiceover narrations demanded by television. Nevertheless, in its residual commitment to depicting the 'common man' and to making connections between conditions in a world made small by the power of weapons of mass destruction and television alike, *World Without End* is an important document in the twilight of the British documentary film movement.

Notes

1. This research was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Mahmoud Ghander and Jens Boel of the UNESCO Archives, Paris. My thanks to Cassandra Savage and Laurynas Navidauskas for research assistance.
2. Letter from Arthur Knight to Paul Rotha and Basil Wright, 23 August 1953. Unless otherwise noted, all archival documents referenced in this chapter are from the *World Without End* production file housed at the UNESCO Archives, Paris (ref. #: 341.134.073.533.450.1)
3. Paul Rotha, *Rotha on the Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 98.
4. Elizabeth Sussex gives this account of the fate of International Realist: 'Shortly after [making *World Without End*], Wright was advised by his accountants that International Realist was making so much profit that "the most convenient thing to do would be to go into liquidation before we went into the upper company tax bracket." So International Realist went into voluntary liquidation. "It suited me," says Wright, "because I didn't particularly want to run a company. I was getting tired of running companies."' Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 183.
5. Ibid., p. 182.
6. 'New Directions in Documentary', Edinburgh Film Festival International Conference (1951). Wright participated on the panel 'New Horizons', discussing UNESCO's work on using film to raise standards of living and education in underdeveloped countries. Wright and Rotha both participated on the panel 'The Sponsor and the Creative Artist'.
7. Basil Wright, *The Long View* (London: Sekker and Warburg, 1974).
8. Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films* (London: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 77.
9. Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 286.
10. Timothy Boon, *Films of Fact* (London: Wallflower Press, 2008), p. 129.
11. Perhaps this radical message was what inspired pressure from 'high places' in the United States and the United Kingdom to prevent either film from reaching public screens. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), p. 284.
12. Wyndham Lewis, *America and Cosmic Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949), p. 21. McLuhan, a friend and admirer of Lewis, later utilised the term in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press). Released a decade earlier, in 1953, *World Without End* is much closer to Edward Steichen's famous *Family of Man* exhibit at MoMA in 1955 than to McLuhan. But all of these sentiments were perhaps most memorably condensed and commodified by the Sherman Brothers in their song 'It's a Small World', written to accompany Disney's exhibit of the same name, which debuted at New York's 1964 World's Fair, later opening permanently at Disneyland in 1966.

13. Ross McLean to William Beatty, 7 August 1952. *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers, University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Special Collections.
14. Ross McLean to Paul Rotha, 18 November 1952. *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers.
15. Ross McLean to Basil Wright, 25 November 1952. *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers. 'I react violently against Ross's idea about "neighbourhood",' wrote Rotha to Wright 15 December 1952. *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers.
16. It is interesting to note that Rotha ordered a copy of his film *The World is Rich* to show to the students and staff at CREFAL (Centro Regional de Educacion Fondamental para la America Latina), the school in Patzcuaro where he was filming. Thomas Baird to Paul Rotha, 13 November 1952. *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers.
17. Cecile Starr, 'One World', *Saturday Review* vol. 13 no. 2 (1954), n.p.; transcription in *World Without End* file, Paul Rotha Papers.
18. Henry Cassirer, 'Will TV Link the World?', in Paul Rotha (ed.), *Television in the Making* (London: Focal Press, 1956), p. 158.