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EXPERIMENTS IN PROPAGANDA

JENNIFER HORNE

Reintroducing James

Blue's Colombia Trilogy

In a newspaper column published in April 1953, the American social critic Walter Lippmann sharply criticized the creation of a newly bureaucratized government propaganda agency by noting the ineffectiveness of counterpropaganda tactics. “As a way of stimulating the appetite for the American way of life,” Lippmann wrote, “it is like serving castor oil as a cocktail before dinner.”¹ Fundamentally opposed to the creation of a mass media monopoly, but more concerned that exporting state propaganda was simply counterproductive, Lippmann seized on the obvious falseness of the gesture: “Foreigners are in more ways than one a good deal more like Americans, and certainly like us in that they do not wish to feel they are being manipulated and made fools of by someone with something to sell.” Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely because of the common desire people have to not be manipulated, in the years to follow, a semantic forest would spring up to complicate and obscure the operations of the United States Information Agency (USIA; or USIS, for United States Information Service, overseas), the government office that was established as its own entity outside of the Department of State in August 1953 and shuttered in 1999.

Those who worked for this agency no longer referred to themselves, in the direct language Lippmann might have preferred, as propagandists. The nomenclature invented to describe the work of influencing foreign opinion and other state-to-state activities was nuanced and muted: USIA agents now worked in *public diplomacy*, *cultural diplomacy*, *public affairs*, and *cultural affairs*. At the same time, combining in one agency the opposing pursuits of multilateral cultural education and propaganda meant that while the job of the cultural attaché was recast in the language of informatics, the overseas communications fieldworkers, too, had to adjust to older notions of cultural diplomatic practice. Over the years, the USIA hired an array of specialists for work in both fast and slow media who had backgrounds in entertainment industries, information and library science, journalism, and media technology. Information transmission was the supposedly unproblematic nature of the agency’s mission. But it was the other side of the communications dynamic, its encounter with culture, the public, and the affairs it conducted on foreign soil—its ideological and psychological operations—that came to epitomize and symbolize the Cold War bureaucracy.

Indeed, between 1946 and 1974, even as the CIA conducted its own covert propaganda efforts, the USIA experimented with an array of cultural and educational programs designed to export and celebrate American culture.² While Voice of America was the agency’s audio emblem, the lesser-known Motion Picture Service incorporated experiments with documentary into its operations, with some notable success. Among the filmmakers recruited for this program in creative propaganda were a number of well-known,

or soon to be well-known, American auteurs of independent documentary and avant-garde cinema. Comparable to the work of studio directors such as Frank Capra, John Ford, and John Huston on behalf of the U.S. military during World War II (WWII), the participation of filmmakers such as Ed Emshwiller, Charles Guggenheim, Bruce Hirschensohn, and Leo Seltzer in the Cold War work of the USIA has been—like the films themselves—a well-kept secret. The purpose of this short essay is to shed light on this remarkable alliance, and to provide historical and political context for the propaganda work of one such Cold War artist, the documentary filmmaker and writer James Blue. The 2008 Orphan Film Symposium provided the occasion to reintroduce three of Blue’s USIA films to the viewers, who watched the projection of pristine 35mm prints, loaned from the collections of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, DC.

USIA was a complex and ideological entity, divided in both its mission and its internal operations. On the one hand, the agency was rooted in the foreign affairs traditions of state envoys and the arts of ambassadorship and reflected the hierarchical structure and mission of the Department of State. On the other, it was a media organization attempting to modernize international communications and shape world opinion. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had referred to the USIA as having “P-programs” (i.e., propaganda) but simultaneously celebrated it as a “people-to-people” organization. Anecdotes told in career memoirs and professional reflections similarly reflect this confused identity, one that stemmed from a crucial and persistent lack of clarity within the organization of the distinction between culture and information.

This conflated philosophy was a defining feature of the USIA, one that might allow us to better understand how experimental filmmakers and documentarians might have been able to thrive in an otherwise restrictive and message-oriented workplace. The lack of subtlety in the agency’s operating around the notion of culture is particularly worth examining, for so much of what is contained in the moving image archive of the USIA can be understood as historically peculiar recordings of culture. Rather than seeking to clarify what was possibly the most palpable symptom of the agency’s conflicted self-understanding, we might instead allow this murky definition to be the prism through which we examine the moving image artifacts of the agency.

Former USIA envoy Richard Arndt has instructively pointed out that in the lexicon of the USIA, the words *culture* and *cultural*—especially where connected to the words *affairs*, *diplomacy*, *attaché*, or *policy*—belonged to the arts and education “side” of the agency. Arndt explains the functional ambiguity of the ideas of culture and information, observing how the official location of the agency could matter more than clarity of purpose.³ Inside the Department of State, cultural programming sounded menacing. Moved

outside of the Department of State, information could become the not-so-secret cover for cultural programming. But genuine cultural diplomacy, respectful conversation among representatives of different ways of life, diminished as the number of sponsored programs increased in the late 1950s. This increase was seen especially in displays and exhibits at international expositions and smaller trade fairs promoting American agricultural and industrial exports, an innovation in which the USIA excelled. Internationalism itself, it seemed, had lost traction as an idea, and certainly the agency's ability to fulfill its mission suffered. At the core of the agency was a field structure idealistically geared toward international cooperation and a belief in the possibility of cultural relations, objectives that were at continuous odds with the mission of promoting American foreign policies abroad. Throughout its existence, however, the USIA contained within it these two distinct cultures.

The gradual transformation of what was to become the USIA can be traced back to key periods of information campaigning during international conflict: President Wilson's appointment of journalist George Creel to head the short-lived Committee on Public Information in 1917, for instance, or President Roosevelt's creation of the lesser-known Agency for Foreign Intelligence and Propaganda in 1941. Fundamental to the politicization of the agency was the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act, referred to as the Smith-Mundt Act, which President Truman signed into law in 1948. In keeping with the peculiar partnering of information with cultural affairs, this legislation sought to extend the Fulbright educational exchanges begun in 1946, but the law also prohibited the presentation within the United States of any state-funded American propaganda intended for foreign audiences.⁴ In 1953, under the authority of the Reorganization Act of 1949, the Eisenhower administration made the USIA an entity independent of the State Department.⁵ The agency was authorized to exert American influence abroad in print media, radio broadcasts, libraries, book publishing, television, exhibits, the teaching of English, and personal contacts. Through each medium, it was to communicate to targeted audiences a favorable impression of U.S. foreign policies and the American way of life. Crucially, the USIA was more than just a communications conglomerate. An information-age entity with a social science agenda, it was imagined as both sender and receiver. Its offices and overseas outposts would collect masses of information on the entertainment and information consumption patterns of foreign audiences. Most importantly, if the information gathered was deemed important to foreign policy, it would be brought to the attention of the president.⁶

Unlike other cultural affairs operations, the USIA had been placed in a contentious location close to the office of the president and his security council. In a White House memo dated January 25, 1963, President Kennedy affirmed this advisory role, stating

that while “the Director of the U.S. Information Agency shall take the initiative in offering counsel where he deems it advisable, the various departments and agencies should seek such counsel when considering policies and programs which may substantially affect or be affected by foreign opinion.”⁷ A few months later, before a House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing titled “Winning the Cold War: The U.S. Ideological Offensive,” Edward R. Murrow was asked to state the mission of the agency. As the USIA director at the time, he recited the agency’s singular purpose: to communicate American foreign policy “as enunciated by the President and the State Department.”⁸ “We do this in two ways,” Murrow explained to the committee, “first, by influencing public attitudes abroad in support of these objectives, and second, by advising the President and the executive branch on the implications of foreign opinion for current and contemplated U.S. policies and programs.” A year after the hearings, Representative Dante Fascell (D-FL) submitted his subcommittee’s findings to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Assailing a “fuzziness of concept” at work in what it referred to as the “third dimension of foreign policy,” the report nonetheless reasserted the strategic value of the USIA’s presence at national security meetings with the president. At the same time, the report, citing the Kennedy memorandum, raised the concern that “[the agency’s consultative power] can create confusion and uncertainty about the real location of authority and responsibility.”⁹

Framed in this controversial manner, the agency’s dual propagandistic and advisory role opened a new chapter in American foreign diplomacy. This feedback loop raised the ire of many outside the agency, but the power to advise the president on the temperature of foreign opinion and thereby influence foreign policy was one most treasured by staff members. In defense of the agency’s unique position within the executive branch, former USIA officer Fitzhugh Green recalled in 1988 that the

USIA featured prominently in defusing reactions to the Bay of Pigs fiasco and announcing the triumphant resolution of the Cuban missile crisis. Bruce Herschenson [*sic*], USIA’s talented moving picture chief, produced hard-line propaganda films. One, *Five Cities in June* [i.e., *The Five Cities of June*, 1963], sneered at the obviously inaccurate Russian portrayal of their space exploits and touted the brilliant U.S. space achievements. When I screened this film at the U.S. Mission to the U.N., the Soviet guests left the theater in a huff, understandably irritated over the space commentary.¹⁰

In January 1970, the *Washington Post* reported that the agency’s influence “in the making of policies it must justify abroad” had been discernibly reduced, in part an outcome of the

Nixon administration's exclusion of the USIA from National Security Council meetings.¹¹ In 1977, the agency was briefly renamed the International Communications Agency and reoriented towards a new goal of so-called public diplomacy. Continuing many of the policies of the Nixon and Ford administrations, but heralding a rhetorical sea-change in response to the public distaste for the idea of state propaganda, President Jimmy Carter declared, "the Agency will undertake no activities which are covert, manipulative or propagandistic."¹² In 1982, President Ronald Reagan returned the agency name to the USIA. In 1999, the State Department took over the agency's duties and the USIA was officially closed.

Outside of a handful of career memoirs, the agency's history has remained largely obscure and piecemeal.¹³ The surviving material history of the agency could support a wealth of studies in a variety of academic disciplines. As Nicholas J. Cull points out, the substantial documentary film output of the USIA Motion Picture Service has received scant scholarly attention.¹⁴ This curious absence from American film and television histories is due in large part to the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which included a ban on exhibiting USIA productions inside the United States (except to members of the press and under congressionally approved circumstances). There was a failed attempt to lift the ban in 1972. The law was successfully amended in 1990, when Congress gave the Archivist of the United States the ability to distribute USIA "motion pictures, films, and videotapes" twelve years after the date of dissemination abroad or, if never disseminated, twelve years after production. But academic and historical neglect of these "impounded" federal films also persists because of the difficulties of archival access.¹⁵

After the USIA had been decommissioned, its productions, libraries, administrative files, and records were either classified, discarded, sent to cultural affairs offices within the State Department, or moved to the NARA. Those accessioned by NARA have been broken up into separate collections areas. An estimated thirty-five thousand reels of USIA motion picture material alone (finished films, unedited footage, and outtakes) are held at the National Archives. Its catalog describes Record Group 306, the Records of the U.S. Information Agency, as containing "96 motion image series, of which 84 contain film titles." Detailed descriptions of series are yet to be produced. Musical rights clearance continues to inhibit industrial and other repurposing of the material. Nevertheless, among the myriad forms of evidence it might supply, the USIA's multitopic moving image record could significantly enrich our understanding of the nation's unique cinematic and televisual address to the rest of the world during the Cold War.¹⁶

That the collection is highly underutilized today by researchers is not surprising. Even at its zenith, when it benefited from Murrow's high-profile persona, the USIA remained sheltered from view. At the time, even many congressional representatives had

difficulty distinguishing the operations of the USIA from the daily functions of USIS reading rooms and bookmobiles, construing the motion picture division as a 16mm rental library and thinking of its head as a librarian.¹⁷ In a 1963 hearing of the House Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, Representative Frances P. Bolton (R-OH) asked Murrow two questions: Did the Films Division dispose of badly worn prints? And, were audiences tired of watching westerns?¹⁸ We could attribute the congresswoman's vague understanding of this agency to the ban on the U.S. exhibition of the films, which had very effectively removed almost any discussion of them from the American mediascape.

The moving image holdings at NARA are only a partial representation of the agency's total film output. Arguably, under Murrow's directorship (1961–63) and for a few years after his death, morale within the agency was at its peak, and film production at its highest quality. In 1962, the USIA annual operating budget was \$121 million. Of that, \$1 million was earmarked for the creation of release prints, a mere \$500,000 for the operation of mobile and four-walled exhibition venues, and a budget line of \$92,000 was specified for the Disney-designed Circarama system, a 16mm panoramic projection onto a continuous, circular screen.¹⁹ For the dozen or so USIA films made every year, production was mostly done by private motion pictures companies, on a contract basis. In-house staff worked on editing and sound recording, publicity, translation, and distribution. In addition to documentaries, newsreels, and short subjects, the agency produced a monthly screen magazine called *Today*, for dissemination in African regions. The organization boasted that 60 million viewers watched its export-only films in 746 theaters and that a Soviet publication called the program "anti-communist propaganda."²⁰ At this time, the agency claimed eleven thousand workers on its payroll, operated 239 offices in 105 countries (claiming that its presence was increasing in the decolonizing areas of the world), and broadcast Voice of America in thirty-six languages 761 hours a week. Under Murrow, television transmission had expanded to Liberia and the Philippines.²¹ In 1964, the agency reported that it serviced some 226 "film centers" in 106 countries, requiring the use of more than seven thousand five hundred projectors and nearly three hundred mobile-unit trucks to facilitate film distribution and rural exhibition. Films in the field were exhibited in more than fifty languages and dialects. In some cases, USIA pictures were put into theatrical distribution and even submitted to film festivals. At that time, the Motion Picture Service was staffed by 158 positions. Although not included in the distribution staff of the Motion Picture Service, the USIS film libraries abroad were critical to the hub-and-spoke system of film circulation, making the actual total number of staff committed to the film operation larger.²²

The most consistent definition of the agency's mission across its years of operation and under different directors was that it would "submit evidence to peoples of other nations by means of communications techniques that the objectives and policies of the U.S. are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace." This evidentiary purpose might suggest that the proscribed film style would be the expository mode. Indeed, four imperatives also emphasized a show-and-tell approach to foreign audiences: explain U.S. policies; demonstrate how those policies "harmonized" with other nations' goals; counter propaganda against the United States; and "delineate" aspects of American life that would help to clarify U.S. policies.²³ Those obtusely worded guidelines (with the exception of the order to "counter hostile propaganda") resulted in documentary portraits such as *In Search of Lincoln* (1956), *Robert Frost* (1960), and a panorama of American historical sites called *Pilgrimage of Liberty* (1958). Budgetary restrictions also shaped house style. Under Theodore Streibert, one of Murrow's predecessors, Turner Shelton headed a motion picture unit (then called International Motion Picture Service) hamstrung by accounting procedures ill suited to creative production. Newsreel reports, recordings of speeches, and documentary projects were all assigned on a "low bid" contract. George Stevens Jr., the idealistic head of Motion Pictures hired by Murrow, would turn this restriction into an advantage, bringing in young filmmakers, pressuring the contracted producers to hire the pricier creative talent, and using "creative accounting."²⁴

Film delivery for a United States Information and Educational Exchange program screening in Spain, 1949. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

Many credit the unusual aesthetic experimentation of that period to the leadership of Murrow and/or Stevens, or to the chemistry between them—and between Murrow and Kennedy as well. Stevens, who later became the founding director of the American Film Institute, recalled that at the time, “relatively few had their eyes on filmmaking.” “In the film-crazed world of today, where even minor directors are celebrities, it’s hard to comprehend how different the landscape was in the early 1960s. Films were considered by the elite to be an avenue of middle-class escape, a lower form of entertainment than theater, ballet, and opera.”²⁵ As Richard Dyer McCann has noted in his analysis of the unit as it operated from 1962 to 1967, “the art of the film was notably, if somewhat secretly, enriched.”

Whatever one might say about the individual films, the essential thing was that an atmosphere of experimentation was maintained in the very midst of a mundane propagandist mission. In the tradition of John Grierson, Stevens managed to draw into a program of national publicity a variety of individualists. The U.S. Information Agency became the only place in the United States where young film-makers might advance from college projects or first efforts for industrial sponsors to a filmic statement on a broader theme.²⁶

McCann’s book *The People’s Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (1973) offers the most complete film-historical account of George Stevens’s creative leadership as head of the USIA filmmaking division. Stevens was twenty-nine years old and working as an associate producer on his father’s Hollywood films, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), when he accepted an invitation from Murrow to put into practice his notion of “how motion pictures and filmmakers might contribute to the New Frontier.”²⁷ In his own writing and in interviews, Stevens credits his inspiration and success to Murrow and to JFK and, to this day, still recites the five policy ideals which guided public service under that administration: (1) the pursuit of peace, (2) strength and reliability, (3) free choice, (4) the rule of law, and (5) the support of the United Nations.

If we think of his efforts to revitalize government documentary filmmaking as a product of Cold War hostilities, we neglect the degree to which Stevens’s choice of topics was driven by his producer’s sensibility. Among the many talented filmmakers Stevens hired during his five years at the USIA were Bruce Herschensohn, Ed Emshwiller, William Greaves, Charles Guggenheim, Leo Seltzer, Terry and Denis Sanders, Carroll Ballard, Kent Mackenzie, Haskell Wexler, and James Blue. Stevens created a competition for

filmmaking students to create a short documentary about their school directed at foreign audiences. Internal diplomacy was often how he succeeded in seeing films to completion. According to McCann, Bruce Herschensohn's short documentary *The Five Cities of June* (1963, produced by Hearst Metrotone's *News of the Day* crew) was popular overseas, admired by Kennedy, and nominated for an Academy Award. *The Five Cities of June*, Nicholas Cull writes, "offered a society that was capable of reform, unafraid to discuss its problems in public, and whose values came together in the person of a dynamic president, who was prepared to confront the Soviet threat resolutely and in the name of freedom."²⁸ Herschensohn made the first feature-length USIA documentary, *John F. Kennedy—Years of Lightning, Day of Drums* (1964), after making a small, poignant film about Lyndon Johnson called *The President* (1964).²⁹ In 1967, Stevens became the founding director of the American Film Institute.

In 1964, the USIA released a controversial documentary treatment of the August 1963 civil rights march on Washington called *The March*. In anticipation of the event, Stevens had arranged for Hearst Metrotone cameramen and brought in the young filmmaker James Blue to direct. According to Nicholas Cull, Blue instructed the camera operators to avoid the newsreel habit of moving from one scene to the next to capture facial expressions and reactions in the crowd. He shot handheld footage of the arrival of marchers on buses the day before and of the speakers on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Controversy surrounded the film upon its release, displeasing President Lyndon Johnson. In a compromise between the White House and the USIA, a stiff USIA Director Carl T. Rowan delivered a filmed prologue.³⁰ MacCann notes that the thirty-three minute film "has something of the epic quality of *The River*, and in the manner of that poetic government documentary, it reflects the sharp excitement of a great contemporary issue."³¹

While *The March* has the distinction of having been named to the National Film Registry in 2008, there is perhaps no better illustration of the Motion Picture Service's creative approach to the information film than the three short films about Colombia that it produced in 1963. Filmmakers James Blue and Stevan Lerner had met in Paris in 1956 while studying film on the G.I. Bill. Stevens had seen Blue's feature film about an Algerian family, *The Olive Trees of Justice* (1962), at Cannes and hired both men to come to the USIA. To serve the Kennedy Administration's "Alliance for Progress," Stevens sent Blue and Lerner to Bogotá, Colombia.³²

Part of Kennedy's foreign policy mission in the region was to stimulate economic self-sufficiency with a partnership between the Colombian government and American entrepreneurs and businesses.

Using a Nagra audio tape recorder and a 35mm camera, the two returned with material for three films, which Blue then edited into lyrical and unexpectedly self-reflexive essay films on health reform, education, land reclamation, and housing. The resulting works—*A Letter from Colombia*, *Evil Wind Out*, and *The School at Rincon Santo*—are similar enough in theme and style to be considered a trilogy, even if they were never intended to be seen as such. *The School at Rincon Santo* won documentary prizes at film festivals in Bilbao and Amsterdam. *A Letter from Colombia* received a special award in 1963 from the Centre for Human Relations in Venice. Larner recalled his time making films for USIA:

I was hired to create segments for a theatrical news magazine, called *Horizons* (Horizontes) in a newsreel format (the other contractor was Hearst-Metrotone news) to be distributed in Latin America by the United States Investigations Service [*sic*] (USIS). I was to travel to Colombia and Central America, spend two to three weeks in each country, developing three to seven minute stories, shoot them, and send the exposed 35mm black and white negative back to Hearst-Metrotone, along with script notes, shot lists, etc. for editing and voice-over narration. Also I was to use a local as my assistant and train him or her to be able to generate other stories after I left.³³

In tone and in sentiment, the films offer photographic evidence that Larner and Blue went beyond their assignment and practiced a kind of cultural diplomacy through their filmmaking.

***A Letter from Colombia* promotes the Alliance for Progress only through the general respect that it shows for large-scale state modernization programs.**

The film's skeptical, essayistic structure does not suppress the human costs of industrialization. For example, at the start of the film, we are shown a woman moving small boxes that are then revealed to be child-sized coffins. Over these images, James Blue's reticent narration comes across as that of an outsider with a guilty conscience: "I have come here to make one of those films about progress that you see from time to time. New housing, industry, machinery: progress with a big *P* that you can measure in tons of bricks and miles of road. This is about my search for that progress, what I found, and where I looked to find it." After declaring that symbols of progress "all look alike," Blue pauses to make fun of newsreels and government-sponsored films that sell the notion of industrial progress and "better living" as if anyone could be against the idea, a gesture that makes cinematic sense but likely did not win unanimous support in Washington.

In *Evil Wind Out*, a cigarette-smoking doctor comes from a national public health service to a town suspicious of modern medical practices; the film concludes with the dedication of a new health center. *The School at Rincon Santo*—which displays perhaps the most virtuosic use of non-actors in Blue’s USIA films—relates the story of the construction of a rural community’s first schoolhouse.

In an interview Blue gave while he was still working under Stevens at the USIA, he said he was especially fond of *The School at Rincon Santo*:

It was a wonderful experience; they [the USIA] gave me carte blanche. The theme is people helping themselves to progress. I worked as I always work: finding the essential elements of a situation which, when brought together, express something about the situation without my having to intervene in it. . . . I’m always very proud of myself when I do that entirely. There’s one film in this group where I brought everything out of the existing materials. It’s called *The School at Rincon Santo*, and it is the most successful of the three films.³⁴

The cigarette-smoking doctor “from the nation’s public health service” arrives in the rural village and waits on the steps of a church in *Evil Wind Out* (James Blue, 1963).

Reimagining progress, property, and community in *A Letter from Colombia* (James Blue, 1963).

“Never has a one-room schoolhouse meant more than the new school at Rincon Santo,” the voice-over narration tells us in *The School at Rincon Santo* (James Blue, 1963).

We might think of the shot just after the title sequence in *The School at Rincon Santo*, two boys surreptitiously slipping into the side of a state building, as a metaphor for Blue and Larner at the USIA, drawn into the institution by a mischievous curiosity. Years later James Blue said that he had always aspired to do “regional filmmaking—to reflect a region to itself,” a goal which cut against the very aims of its ideological purpose.³⁵

For documentaries meant to explain and promote American foreign policy, these films are surprisingly sensitive and compassionate. In fact, they could be thought of as ambassadors who do not hesitate to speak out of turn, subverting their diplomatic mission. *The School at Rincon Santo* inhabits the social imaginary of a small Colombian village. In *Evil Wind Out*, there is oversimplification, but in the service of community theater. And in *A Letter from Colombia*, parody of the expository voice itself. The personal view and intimate voice-over, the association of dreaming and development, the clear references to Chris Marker, Luis Buñuel, and other filmmakers—somehow, these expressive qualities survived the bureaucratic scrutiny to which they were submitted.

In comparison with other agency-produced media depicting American foreign policy in a more didactic manner, Blue’s films were radical statements.

But they can also be understood using the deprecatory terms that USIA staff borrowed from anthropology to refer to officers who made themselves too much at home while abroad. They were said to be “going native” or had contracted “localitis.”³⁶ With a little less condemnation, this agency-speak could also be used to describe Blue’s rogue identificatory narration, especially his explicit interest in creating films that would speak directly to local audiences by attempting to present their realities and their fears about modernization. After all, just a few years later, ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall would celebrate James Blue and Stevan Larner’s final collaboration for the USIA, *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* (1968), for exemplifying the desire for a more intersubjective documentary ethics, what he termed Blue’s “unprivileged camera style.”³⁷ Margaret Mead had served as a consultant on that project, a prescient meditation on the global food crisis that required months of shooting in Brazil, Uganda, India, and Taiwan, and six months of editing upon return. *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* was one of the many USIA productions to garner significant critical attention in festivals and received an Academy Award nomination in the documentary short subject category. Soon after that film was completed, James Blue left the USIA in protest of U.S. foreign policies in Vietnam. He continued to maintain his working relationship with George Stevens Jr., however. Stevens recruited Blue to join the film production faculty of the American Film Institute in its first year.

Layered voice-over in *The School at Rincon Santo* translates the voice of a community member into English: “We worked with our own hands, nothing more.” The handprint on the window was left by James Blue.

The vast and underutilized collection of USIA moving image material at the National Archives holds many more examples of what we might productively consider American “foreign” films. And no doubt additional USIA films are to be found in private collections and outside the United States as well. As I have tried to suggest here, these films range widely in tone and in message. Each film is representative of a fraught government agency, its relationship to changing American foreign policy, and its ever-present struggle over the definition of cultural diplomacy. In particular, the USIA films made during the five years of George Stevens Jr.’s directorship can be seen as both the reflections of failed foreign policies and their subtle contradiction. In this way, all of these films will remain important meditations on foreign relations: the relations between cultures, between citizens, and between the viewer and the viewed.

NOTES

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9. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Ideological Operations and Foreign Policy*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964, Rept. 1352, 9–13.
10. Fitzhugh Green, *American Propaganda Abroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1988), 36–37. The erroneous reference to Bruce Herschensohn as "motion picture chief" underscores the problems of the career memoir for history writing. For a more authoritative account of *The Five Cities of June*, see Nicholas J. Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology: USIA Documentary Film Propaganda in the Kennedy Era as seen in Bruce Herschensohn's *The Five Cities of June* (1963) and James Blue's *The March* (1964)," *Film History* 10, no.3 (1998): 295–310.
11. A. D. Horne, "Little Change Is Discernible under New Regime at USIA," *Washington Post*, Jan. 2, 1970.
12. Arndt, *First Resort of Kings*, 499.
13. I have relied heavily on these sources for both historical context and internal commentary: Arndt's *First Resort of Kings*, Green's *American Propaganda Abroad*, and Dizard's *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, as well as Lois W. Roth and Richard T. Arndt's, "Information, Culture, and Public Diplomacy: Searching for an American Style of Propaganda," in *The Press and the State: Sociohistorical and Contemporary Interpretations*, ed. Walter M. Brasch and Dana R. Ulloth (New York: University Press of America, 1986).
14. Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology," 295. The journal *Film Comment* published animated discussions of USIA filmmaking, especially regarding the controversial practice of footage reuse. See issues Summer 1965, Spring 1966, Fall-Winter 1967, Spring 1969, and Spring 1970. *Film Comment's* 100th issue recounted the journal's editorial history, including its tackling of USIA film debates. Gordon Hitchens, editor of *Film Comment* from its inception in 1962 until 1970, also worked on six USIA films himself. Hitchens recruited James Blue to contribute regularly to the magazine, beginning in 1963. See Cliff Froehlich, "Inside *Film Comment*," Jan.–Feb. 1984, 33–40.

15. See Foreign Relations and Intercourse Act, U.S. Code 22 (1948), and Code of Federal Regulations, 36, Part 1256.98, "Domestic Distribution of United States Information Agency Audiovisual Materials in the National Archives of the United States." There still exists a duplication restriction covering much of the copyrighted material. Richard Dyer MacCann refers to the USIA films as "impounded" in *The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings House, 1973), 174.
16. For an example of other subject area contributions of the collection, see Donald Roe, "The USIA Motion Picture Collection and African American History: A Reference Review," *Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 29 (1997): 154–61.
17. House Subcommittee, *Winning the Cold War*, 14–16.
18. House Subcommittee, *Winning the Cold War*, 14–15. George Stevens Jr., was head of the Films Division at the time.
19. For a description of the Disney system, see John Belton, "The Curved Screen," *Film History* 16, no. 3 (2004): 284.
20. House Subcommittee, *Winning the Cold War*, 17.
21. House Subcommittee, *Winning the Cold War*, 5.
22. House Subcommittee Committee Print, *U.S. Ideological Effort*, 19–20.
23. Arndt, *First Resort of Kings*, 275.
24. MacCann, *The People's Films*, 178–85. It was Theodore Streibert who had brought in Cecil B. DeMille to advise on the agency's film operations. According to Dizard (*Inventing Public Diplomacy*, 66), DeMille made one trip to Washington in which he delivered a speech about the power of film.
25. George Stevens Jr., *Conversations with the Great Moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age at the American Film Institute* (New York: Vantage, 2006), xii.
26. MacCann, *The People's Films*, 195.
27. Stevens, Jr., *Conversations*, xi.
28. Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology," 301.
29. Some documents related to the release of *John F. Kennedy—Years of Lightning, Day of Drums* to American viewers have been included in *Film and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History*, vol. 4, ed. Lawrence H. Suid (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991). In *American Propaganda Abroad*, Fitzhugh Green offers the following anecdote George Stevens told him about the filming of *The President* which demonstrates the similarities between Washington and a fiction film set: "USIA cameramen shot Johnson from various angles as he sat at his desk one evening in the Oval Office. While the cameras shirred, the president scratched his fountain pen across white sheets of paper. Stevens wondered if he might be writing a speech and surreptitiously peeked over his shoulder. He saw that every page was covered only with . . . Lyndon B. Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson, Lyndon B. Johnson" (38).
30. Cull, "Auteurs of Ideology," 302–9. I have kept my discussion of *The March* brief, in part because Cull has offered such a lengthy and careful discussion of it already.
31. MacCann, *The People's Films*, 192.
32. Blue made five films for the agency, including *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* (1968), which was nominated for an Academy Award.

- 33. Stevan Lerner, "Remembering James Blue," in *James Blue: Scripts and Interviews*, ed. Gerald O'Grady (Houston: Southwest Alternate Media Project, 2002), 6–7.
- 34. Mary Batten, "An Interview with James Blue," in *James Blue: Scripts and Interviews*, 17.
- 35. Mark Mikolas, "Crisis in the Fourth Ward: An Interview with James Blue," in *James Blue: Scripts and Interviews*, 28.
- 36. Arndt, *First Resort of Kings*, 427.
- 37. David MacDougall, "Unprivileged Camera Style," *RAIN* (Royal Anthropological Institute newsletter, London) 50 (1982): 8–10.