‘Before Education, Good Food, and Health’: World Citizenship and Biopolitics in UNESCO’s Post-War Literacy Films

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Abstract
Following its establishment in 1945, UNESCO worked to promote the aims of the UN through a range of educational mechanisms. This chapter considers the textual operations of the agency’s film work in support of fundamental education, literacy and health in the late 1940s and early 1950s, arguing that some of the agency’s structural and ideological contradictions are available for reading therein. Considering The Task Ahead, Mondsee Seminar, World Without End, Books for All, and the Healthy Village Project in relation to the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and UNESCO’s Statements on Race (1950, 1951), the essay explores the ways in which UNESCO filmmakers illustrated the technobiological and often racialized operationalization of the UN’s universal humanist aims.

Keywords: United Nations; UNESCO; biopolitics; educational film; fundamental education; literacy; health; human rights; race

The Task Ahead, a short information film produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1951, well expresses the enormous scope of the agency’s mandate. Over the course of just seventeen and a half minutes, the film establishes that ‘hunger, sickness, and misery’ stalk the world’s masses and posits that education, especially the transfer of technical and scientific skills, is the answer to the scourge of ignorance and war. Amidst all the progress shown in the film, including care for European children maimed in war, and Palestinian
children living in refugee camps in Gaza, the final sequence set in Haiti is perhaps the most compelling. The Marbial Valley is presented as a part of the world ‘where men and women are shut off’, and UNESCO workers are shown offering technical assistance and fundamental education to these, the world’s neglected. In a sequence of images devoted to subsistence farming and social reproduction (a schoolhouse, women washing clothes in a river, children being fed) a barefoot young woman in a black dress and wide-brimmed white hat approaches a white doctor working at a makeshift outdoor clinic. Without any warning, the camera cuts to a close-up of her leg, which is covered with raw, open sores. The European male narrator makes no comment about her condition, speaking instead about the technical work needed in Haiti, from soil remediation and reforestation to water management. In a scene redolent of early 20th-century anthropology, her dress is perfunctorily lifted by the doctor and she is shown, in full profile, receiving a shot in the buttocks, her body objectified and rendered entirely visible (Figure 9.1). This is followed by an equally disturbing close-up shot of the diseased foot of a young boy while the narrator speaks of the need to give children the opportunities for a better life (Figure 9.2).

Two years later, a similar, but much more artfully crafted sequence of people being treated for similar nasty sores on their lower limbs (identified as yaws)—this time in Northern Thailand—appeared in the film *World Without End* (1953), a major production of the UNESCO Division of Mass Communication directed by two British documentary veterans, Basil Wright and Paul Rotha. In this version, the villagers are shown reluctantly

![Image](image_url)
attending a meeting with medical officers. Once one child has been given an inoculation, the villagers all approach at once, ready to be cured of their terrible affliction.

In both cases, the vivid close-ups of the diseased feet and limbs produce in the viewer a feeling of abjection associated with the bodies being shown. In neither case do we hear anything from the people, nor do we see them cured by the treatments they are shown to receive. The Haitian and Thai people are depicted as helpless to treat their own dismal afflictions. Western medical treatment is presented as a benevolent form of technology transfer, an urgent way to help. However, in both cases, the films isolate technical aid from any discussion of political or historical context. The contagious diseases on these bodies act as a visual metaphor for the deformity of the human spirit brought about by deficits in the basic provision for decent life. Without modern medicine and other technologies, these nameless individuals are presented as being abandoned to their compromised fates. However, both films emphasize that fundamental education, or the teaching of literacy, combined with hygiene and agricultural techniques, is a crucial step in the improvement of these desperate lives. Education and health are thus linked through the malleable body of the postcolonial subject. As the narrator of *Hungry Minds* (1947; a film made by the National Film Board of Canada in conjunction with the Canadian Council for Reconstruction through UNESCO) succinctly puts it, ‘before education, good health and food’.

In what follows, I consider UNESCO films and other aspects of the organization’s visual culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s in order to...
think through the ways in which, for all its lofty educational goals for peace, freedom, and cosmopolitan world citizenship, the agency often operated at the level of populations rather than publics, focussing on basic healthcare, agriculture, and literacy as precursors to higher aims. The film-making activities of the United Nations (UN), like all industrial film-making, documented and promoted the organization’s activities and values, which were, for the most part, ‘technobiological’. ¹

Although UNESCO didn’t make many films of its own, preferring for reasons both pecuniary and philosophical to encourage the committees of member nations to sponsor their own work on the subject of the UN and its agencies, the films it did sponsor in this period, including The Task Ahead, Mondsee Seminar (1950), World Without End, Books for All (1954), and the film miniatures of the UNESCO Healthy Village Project (1949), connect in compelling ways to its major initiatives, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Statements on Race, and the launch of a major programme of fundamental education. Not only the film-makers but also the producers and administrators of the Division of Mass Communication were often connected to the British Documentary film group. For instance, John Grierson, father of the British documentary movement, was followed in the position at the helm of the Division of Mass Communication by Ross McLean, formerly his deputy at the National Film Board of Canada.² The combination of reportage, documentary, and moral injunction in these films that so clearly follow from the British documentary tradition combine to tell a compelling story about the UN’s biopolitical operations in this period. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, despite their non-self-reflexive emphasis on the supremacy of Western culture and technology, the aporias and contradictions they register are also able to provide an important key to unlock the logic of the UN, highlighting the special contributions that film analysis can make to the historiography of the organization.

UNESCO’s Communicative Mandate

UNESCO, the UN’s agency for education, science, and culture, was launched with much fanfare at the end of the Second World War to support the mandate of the United Nations and to promote the worthy causes of international lawfulness, the prevention of war, the support for universal human rights, and the promotion of ‘social progress’. Its founding constitution charged

² Druick, ‘UNESCO’. 
the organization to build the ‘defences of peace’ in the minds of humankind and made the claim that ignorance in particular was a leading cause of war. Despite this somewhat idealistic premise, the organization always maintained its focus on culture in general and education for peace in particular, as alone capable of bringing about the ‘intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind’ that would successfully create peace where political and economic arrangements had failed.3

UNESCO’s constitution, signed in San Francisco on 16 November 1945, endorsed three principles: equal opportunities for education, the scientific pursuit of objective truth, and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge. The document presented the assurance that, given the right conditions and the correct content, communication between peoples could lead to fuller comprehension of differences and therefore mutual understanding.4 In Article I of the constitution, international cooperation is called upon to give the ‘people of all countries access to the printed and published materials produced by any of them’, and mass communication is singled out as a means to promote the free flow of ideas by ‘word and image’. There is a clear suggestion that international agreements should be modified to facilitate this transmission, something that UNESCO would indeed go on to pursue during the decade.5 All of these initiatives are part of what Donna Haraway has identified as the therapeutic understanding of communication that prevailed in the post-war agency.6 By this logic, good communication is the route to productive social relations, while bad communication is destined to produce the reverse. Thus, communication becomes the operative level at which to accomplish social and political goals.7

The founding of UNESCO is thus a compelling landmark in international politics for the expression of the discursive power of culture, knowledge,

3 Numerous commentators have noted what a curious claim this is in relation to the recent war in Europe, whose causes could hardly be said to have been based on ignorance. In 1945, even UNESCO head Julian Huxley observed that Nazi Germany had been a highly literate society. Michelle Brattain notes that, in the 1950s, many social scientists, such as Theodor Adorno, questioned the precept that education could be used as an inoculant against racism (Huxley, UNESCO, p. 33; Brattain, ‘Race’).
5 For instance, in 1950, UN member states ratified the Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials, which was intended to exempt such materials from duties. In 1952, UNESCO developed the Universal Copyright Convention for states that disagreed with aspects of the Berne Convention. And, in 1954, a convention was adopted related to the free movement of persons engaged in educational, scientific, and cultural activities.
6 Haraway, ‘Remodelling’. See also Selcer, ‘View from Everywhere’.
7 Wagman, ‘Locating UNESCO’.
and information. Explicitly, it represents a moment when the liberal view of the formative power of information to create publics and constitute cosmopolitan citizens was making a play for global hegemony. In this regard, the founding of UNESCO represents the apex of liberal internationalist aspiration, a utopia of ideas. Yet, UNESCO’s actual on-the-ground operation at the level of practices of what often amounted to neocolonial health, labour, and education policies provides a far different perspective.

The seeds of this contradiction can be seen in the philosophy of Julian Huxley, UNESCO’s first director. Huxley, a biologist, believed in the capacity of ‘scientific world humanism’, to dispassionately improve the lot of humans with technological advances. He was also an unabashed supporter of what he termed positive eugenics, advocating for the scientific improvement of defective populations through breeding. This view led him to a problematic analysis of ‘race’ and human accomplishment. According to his views, underdeveloped intelligence stemmed from cultural and environmental rather than biological deficiencies. Yet, even transposed to deficiencies in environment or education, Huxley’s conflation of the ‘dark areas’ of the globe—the areas in need of enlightenment—with the places where the ‘dark’ people live was racist at its core. In effect, regardless of the cause of compromised populations, his views insidiously reinforced a cultural hierarchy that placed Europe at its apex. Proceeding from this ‘scientific’ position, UNESCO’s projects to catalogue and promote the best of human accomplishments remained invariably Western in orientation. Most generously, UNESCO’s evolutionary or eugenic humanism can be said to have had a racist unconscious that positioned the agency’s work in terms of a global governmentality meant to uphold the power structure of the neo-imperial order. This was the backdrop against which the agency’s film-makers and designers sought to explore ways to represent the global totality.

Looking at the organization’s activities rather than its rhetoric exposes the instrumentalization of the idea of knowledge that is liable to occur when its promotion is reduced to a set of techniques developed to operate on particular bodies for specific reasons. In UNESCO’s films, these contradictions between word and deed are most clearly expressed, making

8 Sluga, ‘UNESCO’.
9 Huxley, UNESCO, p. 6.
10 Huxley, ‘Eugenics’.
11 Huxley, UNESCO, p. 18. See also Sluga, ‘UNESCO’.
12 Hazard, Postwar Anti-Racism.
13 Duedahl, ‘Selling Mankind’.
them useful sites of historical analysis. In what follows, I consider some of the literacy films made by UNESCO in its early years as a means to think about the contradictions at play in both the organization and the liberal internationalist philosophy that underwrote it.

**Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Statements on Race**

The challenge for UNESCO's staff was to ‘transform [...] broad mandates into workable doctrines, procedures, and ways of acting in the world’, and the same might be said for the film-makers trying to find workable ways to communicate and visualize the organization’s abstract principles. In the late 1940s, there were two main initiatives that shaped UNESCO’s focus: *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948, UDHR) and the *Statements on Race* (1950 and 1951). Both discursive exercises engaged numerous intellectuals and led to expansive discussion and debate. They also figured directly in the production of the agency’s visual culture. In 1949, a year after the UDHR, for instance, UNESCO sponsored a major exhibition at Le Musée Galliéria in Paris entitled *Human Rights* (*Les droits de l’homme*). Arranged as an immersive, interactive exhibit, the layout encouraged engagement with a range of photographs and text displayed on ten-foot pillars, as well as film and object installations. By focussing on a cross section of human achievement, the show attempted to demonstrate that there was a general universal tendency towards progress and human rights, even though the founding of the UN spoke rather to an ‘increasingly apparent moral fragmentation’. In addition, as the curators of a recent reconstruction of the show point out, ‘despite [an] attempt to write the history of human rights in a global and inclusive moral language [...] the universalism that informed UNESCO’s institutional discourse in the exhibition remained distinctly European’, with declarations from the French and American revolutions figuring prominently.

The *Human Rights* exhibition and subsequent folio publication universalize the Western notion of human rights and tell a story of world civilization as a struggle for human rights over the ages, beginning with cave-dwellers and ending with the ‘free citizen of a modern democracy’ living in a nuclear

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15 Haraway, *Primate Visions*; Selcer, ‘Beyond the Cephalic Index’.
family unit. High points in various civilizations are presented as common heritage of a global humanity—a notion that would become an intrinsic part of the UNESCO narrative. Nevertheless, Western, urban modernity is taken to be the apex of human achievement. Presumably due to its absence from the UN membership rolls at the time, the Soviet Union is visually missing from the project. This omission of a non-liberal democratic branch of industrial human organization perfectly encapsulates the provincialism of UNESCO’s professed universalism.

The distribution of the exhibition followed the agency’s own logic, launching in Paris, where UNESCO was headquartered, and then touring around the UN’s 50 member nations. The next year, 10,000 abbreviated albums of the exhibit were printed by the Department of Mass Communication. A scene of the album being distributed by UNESCO staff appears in The Task Ahead. The first page in the album depicts an illustration of planet Earth from space, with the continent of Africa clearly foregrounded, although Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of Adam and Eve floating off to the right is somewhat obscured. Dignitaries at the exhibit are also shown looking at one of the elements that was often described as most notable: a three-dimensional map of the world superimposed on a massive diagram of population growth, and a large board with twelve portals registering the average number of ‘white, brown, black and yellow children’ born per second. Thus, despite the show’s stated objective of promoting the equal contributions to global civilization, its denouement ultimately resides in a depiction of humanity as a set of distinct, racialized populations, with white people set to be inundated through global birth rates by those with brown, black, and yellow skin.

The purpose of the travelling album of the exhibit is illustrated in Mondsee Seminar, in which adult educators attending the UNESCO seminar are shown to be looking at the exhibit mounted on boards on the lawn of the Kreuzstein Hotel in Austria. In the context of the film, which is concerned with the techniques of adult education, the content of the images is less important than the fact of its remote installation, and the whole scene is shot with a dynamic right to left travelling shot that recaptures some of the excitement, if not the scale, of the Parisian installation.

18 Allbeson, ‘Photographic Diplomacy’.
19 Brouillette, ‘UNESCO’; Duedahl, ‘Selling Mankind’.
20 Aitken, ‘Provincializing Embedded Liberalism’.
22 The idea of encouraging member states to undertake their own projects related to the aims of the UN was the impetus behind one of the most famous photographic exhibits of the era,
UNESCO, ‘Race’, and Global Governmentality

Staffed mainly by French and English nationals—who, together, held over 90 per cent of UNESCO posts in 1947—the organization’s continuities with colonial administration and logistics were readily apparent. Most relevant to my argument is the way in which UNESCO’s initiatives in the field of visual culture operated at the level of ‘race’ in its pursuit of ‘global governmentality’. In pursuit of the lofty goals set out in its mandate, UNESCO’s day-to-day activities showed that these ideals were necessarily translated into pragmatic strategies. From ‘fundamental education’ campaigns to the improvement of basic living conditions through the transfer of technologies, biopolitical projects figured most prominently in the organization’s work.

As formerly colonized peoples of the world grappled with the imperial inheritances of the UN in general and UNESCO in particular, the organization paid lip service to a tantalizing new world of universal human rights and absolute equality. In many ways, UNESCO’s dizzying contradictions—imperial and postcolonial; global and Euro-American; humanist and technobiological; emancipatory and technocratic—grew out of its connection to interwar progressive education, on one hand, and the late stages of Anglo-European imperialism, on the other. The post-war focus on primary healthcare in the former colonies, for instance, was a direct link to late colonial welfare policies of the 1930s and 1940s, which had attempted to prop up dying colonial regimes through the ethical promise of improvement

Edward Steichen’s *Family of Man* show, first exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955, and then touring the world before selling millions of copies as a book. The UN figures prominently in the *Family of Man*, as does a liberal humanist vision that resonates with the apolitical narrative of peace through common understanding promoted by UNESCO (and seen in the earlier *Les droits de l’homme* exhibit). The links between the global family and the United Nations are made exactly clear through the visual juxtaposition of the comparative global families depicted by the exhibit with the UN parliamentary assembly. The show promotes the idea of family as the universal form, ‘a globalized, utopian family album [...] the family serving as a metaphor [...] for a system of international discipline and harmony’. Popular photography exhibits and publications of this sort were also the perfect self-reflexive promotion for UNESCO’s communicative goals, with the black-and-white realist photograph presented as the quintessential form of ‘universal communication’. The exhibit came to be permanently displayed at the Clervaux Museum in Luxembourg in 1994 and, in 2003, was accepted for inclusion in UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register (Sekula, ‘Traffic in Photographs’, p. 19; Turner, Democratic Surround).

23 Sluga, ‘UNESCO’; see also Hodge, ‘British Colonial Expertise’.
24 Jaeger, ‘UN Reform’.
of the lot of colonial wards. The League of Nations, the UN’s predecessor, had pioneered in the realm of international politics by focussing on food and health rather than other, more contentious political topics. Through film and other educational means, the League had also attempted to create ‘self-disciplined, normal, compliant, moral, or entrepreneurial individuals.’ In so doing, the League had operated along the lines of the ‘biologization of the social’, the ‘central defining characteristic of modernity’, according to historian Edward R. Dickinson. Picking up where the League left off, the UN’s agencies, too, put their focus on the biopolitical.

In the Global North, UNESCO’s work was equally focussed on racialized bodies, although, there, it paradoxically took the form of debunking the concept of ‘race’. Beginning with UNESCO’s two statements on race in 1950 and 1951, the organization commissioned a number of studies to explore the fallacious and destructive discourse of racial hierarchies. These appeared in three series of mass-produced and widely distributed scholarly pamphlets and books by well-known social scientists (The Race Question in Modern Science, The Race Question in Modern Thought, and Race and Society), most famously, Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose pamphlet ‘Race and History’ is still considered the most popular publication ever produced by UNESCO. The project led to a number of expressions in the UNESCO Courier as well as a picture book for children, What is Race? Evidence from Scientists. All of this work aimed to debunk the scientific basis for racial categories and promote the modern ideal of universal rights for ‘Man’. Although members of the Soviet bloc presciently pointed out that, without equality of economic status, universal rights were as good as meaningless,
these considerations were sidelined by the Western nations, as well as some ‘Third World’ nations, which wanted to use the declaration of universal rights as leverage to improve their own condition as newly postcolonial states on the international stage.\footnote{Cmiel, ‘Human Rights’; Marshall, ‘Freud and Marx’. Members of the Soviet bloc also vociferously rejected the UN’s universal claims for individual rights, arguing that the basis for life was much more material, centring around food, clothing, fuel, and housing. The ‘universal individualism’ on which the UN was built is far from universal, as has been elaborated in socialist and postcolonial critiques of the organization.}

The concept of population presented in the UNESCO statements on race effectively made race into a malleable social and political category rather than a natural one. Thus, although universality was meant to create a new basis for politics beyond race, it ended up paradoxically replicating the neocolonial power relationships with new window dressing, as racialized populations remained marked in relation to a white, male norm and were categorically unable to obtain the status of the Western universals against which they were nevertheless perpetually measured.\footnote{Despite Julian Huxley and other key players’ emphasis on the neutrality and universality of science in anti-racism work, seen from another perspective, it was actually science itself that had help to establish the differential family of man discourse in the mid nineteenth century (Stepan, ‘Race’).}

### Visualizing UNESCO’s Literacy Campaigns

The very limited original film work that UNESCO produced was largely related to the promotion of the organization’s activities, especially its work on literacy, such as \textit{The Task Ahead}, \textit{Mondsee Seminar}, \textit{Books for All}, and \textit{World Without End}.\footnote{See Longo, ‘Palimpsests of Power’} In two different lengths and several language versions, \textit{World Without End} was shown extensively at film festivals and in film societies and was broadcast in several national contexts.\footnote{Aitken, ‘World Without End’; Druick, ‘Visualising the World’; MacDonald, ‘Evasive Enlightenment’} This film, which uses the UN’s work in Siam (Thailand) and Mexico as a metonym of its global vision, is an excellent primer on the concept of fundamental education, the prototype of UN-based technical assistance and developmentalism, adopted as central part of UNESCO’s programme in 1947.\footnote{Dorn and Ghodsee, ‘Cold War Politicization’; Sluga, ‘UNESCO’; Webster, ‘Development Advisors’} It also expresses some of the contradictions at work in the output of British documentary film
movement stalwarts who made claims of political progressiveness, but also readily worked within imperial and Orientalist frameworks.  

The fact that the film is concerned with fundamental education well illustrates its organizational character—it was made expressly to promote UNESCO’s initiatives. But fundamental education itself was also the quintessential biopolitical policy of the agency. It was determined early on that the loftier (and more liberal) principle of the free flow of information was ultimately reliant on something as banal as basic literacy. Where people could not read and write (and thereby constitute a modern public), the existence of a local press was irrelevant. To educate for literacy would, by this logic, establish one of the basic conditions for democracy—with the side benefit of producing enhanced human capital. The advocacy of literacy neatly avoided the discussion of content—there is no mention of enlightenment or consciousness-raising as was done by socialist literacy initiatives, for instance. This is an ‘instrumentalized literacy’, to use Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee’s phrase, with reading conceptualized as a neutral technique.  

However, more than this, fundamental education (FE) was part of a development theory that defined UNESCO throughout the post-war decade for teaching literacy as a means to practical social improvements, especially for peasants and small-scale farmers. According to Phillip Jones, the term, proposed by the Chinese delegate, was chosen over the alternatives ‘mass education’ and ‘popular culture’, proposed by the English and French delegates respectively, because it amalgamated and operationalized human rights, international collaboration, mass education, and social progress. The first three FE pilot projects—in East Africa, Haiti, and China—were modelled on British colonial ‘mass education’. The first experiment, undertaken in the Marbial valley in Haiti in 1948, failed in a telling way. Haiti was one of only a handful of independent states with predominantly black populations eligible to be founding members of the UN/UNESCO. The project, co-sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Rockefeller Foundation, was a multipronged affair that included teacher training as well as the establishment of rural primary schools, an agricultural school, rural clinics, a health education clinic, a library, and programmes of adult education.

38 Aitken, ‘Provincializing Embedded Liberalism’.  
39 Dorn and Ghodsee, ‘Cold War Politicization’.  
40 Dorn and Ghodsee, ‘Cold War Politicization’, p. 373.  
42 Sluga, ‘UNESCO’, p. 410
Yet, the project was plagued by racist treatment from UNESCO’s administration and, after only a few years, was handed off to the Haitian government. Without an adequate funding plan in place, it was left to languish.43 The Haitian pilot programme showed both the potential of global aid and the disastrous consequences that could result if funding did not follow through. Its failure was so spectacular, in fact, that it led to the cancellation of the Chinese and East African pilots as well.44

The Marbial sequence in The Task Ahead, described at the outset of this chapter, was likely edited together from footage meant to document the project. Unlike many of the other sequences, it constitutes an uncharacteristically sustained section. Positioned at almost the very end of the film, it is also the section that communicates the most concern over concrete challenges to improving the living standards of the world’s poor. Unlike displaced populations from the Second World War, the Haitians are structurally poor and disadvantaged. Yet, the film contains no indication of any of the conditions that make Haiti unique. The fact of its revolution beginning with a slave revolt just two years after the French revolution and subsequent debilitating sanctions and boycotts from Europe and the United States, for instance.45 Absent, too, is the vocal support of Caribbean nations and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the United States for the application of the principles of universal human rights in the lead up to the UDHR.46 This sequence acts as something of an abstraction of a very particular situation, rendering Haiti into an anyplace of the Global South in need of Western aid. The effect is made even starker by the discrepancy between the visuals and the soundtrack. The white male narrator’s decision to discuss the needs of the nation rather than address what is wrong with the woman’s leg indicates a kind of ‘sonic colour line’, as identified by Jennifer Lynn Stoever. Black people are at once highly visible and silenced, or ‘soundproofed’.47 This aesthetic strategy cannot be attributed solely to dominant conventions of narration or financial restraint, as multi-voiced narrations and other sonic experiments had already been used widely in documentary since the 1930s. Rather, it must be seen as the expression of a contradiction built into UNESCO’s neo-imperialist Euro-humanist vision. Despite lip service to universal humanism, black and other non-white bodies

43 Verna, ‘Haiti’.
44 Dorn and Ghodsee, ‘Cold War Politicization’.
45 James, Black Jacobins.
46 Hazard, Postwar Anti-Racism.
were seen as biopolitical problems to be turned into human capital. Their histories and cultures, though considered lesser branches of the family of man, were seen to be no impediment to making them into productive economic actors. UNESCO's programme of fundamental education was a similar compromise between equality and freedom, on one hand, and pragmatism, on the other.

In an address to a London conference on ‘Film in Colonial Development’ given on 16 January 1948, John Grierson, Director of Mass Communications at UNESCO, parsed the difference between fundamental education and full literacy in his address on ‘The Film and Primitive Peoples’:

The wider aim of Fundamental Education [...] is to help men and women to live fuller lives in adjustment with their changing environment, to develop the best elements of their own culture, and to achieve the economic and social progress which will enable them to take their place in the world. Fundamental Education should thus be designed to provide a first step to further education. While universal literacy may be a desirable ideal, the teaching of reading and writing is not the only, or even always the most immediate, purpose of Fundamental Education. 48

According to this logic, the application of technological fixes for fundamental education became the birthplace of media literacy. 49 If you couldn't create literacy, you could still educate people with the ‘illiterate media’. 50

Faced with an enormous population to be educated across the globe and very limited funds, UNESCO employees made the logical decision to mobilize technology and focus on the use of visual media in general, and educational films in particular, as the best way to jump the ‘literacy hurdle’.

A good example of the emphasis on media for fundamental education can be found in The Healthy Village project, another one of UNESCO’s educational initiatives, undertaken in 1949 in Pehpei, China. Film animator Norman McLaren was seconded from the National Film Board of Canada to run workshops for local artists and primary healthcare providers on how to communicate health messages through visual means. While the Red Army marched through town, his team innovated inexpensive direct application filmstrip-making techniques, scroll boxes, and two-way posters to convey

48 Grierson, ‘Film and Primitive Peoples’, p. 10.
49 Druick, ‘Myth of Media Literacy’.
50 Carey, Communication as Culture, p. 9.
the simple messages about hygiene (e.g. wash your hands before handling food or touching your eyes, keep flies off your food).51

The five films produced by the workshop focus on making visible invisible forces such as bacteria, viruses, and nutrients. In the animated short film Cholera, for instance, a woman is shown washing her clothes in a river. Another woman approaches the river downstream and draws water. A close-up on a drop of water in her bucket shows that it is full of bugs—bacteria, presumably from the first woman’s dirty clothes. A man drinks from the bucket and the bacteria are shown entering his system. He begins throwing up and then dies violently leaving his inadvertent killer—his wife—sobbing by his side. However, in an alternate ending, the man receives a shot that neutralizes the bacteria and is shown alive and smiling at the camera. In the short Eat Beans, Vegetables and Fruits for Vitality, a stick figure awakens and goes for a walk in the woods. After eating a few leafy vegetables foraged there, the figure expresses its newfound revitalization through animation drawn directly onto the 35mm film, dancing in a wildly exuberant expression of pure joie de vivre. In both cases, invisible actors—vaccines and nutrients—are demonstrated with simple animated morality tales.

The China audiovisual experiment was itself made into a filmstrip for educators as well as a publication, both of which are showcased in Mondsee Seminar. In one compelling scene, a group of four educators, three white and one Asian, is shown light-heartedly threading the projector and then turning off the lights in order to watch the first few frames of the filmstrip. The scene then cuts to a reverse shot of another group of four—this time three Asian women and a child—also gathered around a projector in a dark room, their attention apparently on the screen, which remains outside the frame. The film cuts back to the projected filmstrip and finally back to the original group as the lights are switched back on (Figures 9.3–9.5). In this sequence, the educators at the seminar are connected by means of the space of the projected filmstrip into a relationship with others watching the same thing, but presumably in a different context (possibly in Asia, although their location isn’t made explicit. They may be attendees at the same seminar, although there are no other all-Asian groups shown at any point or any children).52


52 The Fundamental Education programme in East Africa was tied to UNESCO’s ill-fated 1946 groundnut scheme. Run in conjunction with the British government and the Overseas Food Corporation, it aimed to transform colonial subjects into modern workers by means of the production of vegetable oil. After it turned out that the region’s terrain and rainfall were ill-suited to peanut cultivation, the company—and the educators—finally pulled out in 1951, leaving huge swaths of devastated land and plans to develop human capital in ruins (Sluga, ‘UNESCO’).
9.3. Adult educators thread up a Healthy Village filmstrip in Mondsee Seminar.

9.4. Promoting eye health from a Healthy Village filmstrip shown within Mondsee Seminar.
World Without End tellingly avoids recounting any stories from Haiti, China, or East Africa and illustrates fundamental education through the use of visual aids in Mexico and a travelling library in Thailand—the places paradoxically chosen, in part, since neither country had been involved in a UNESCO fundamental education scheme—and links these communicative strategies with improvement at the level of both population subsistence and development.53 Fundamental education is thus seamlessly woven into the project of development and modernization without dwelling on any problematic specifics. The film demonstrates the conception of the global population linked by shared space and time—a concept conveyed by an eye-line match edit connecting a Mexican peasant sitting in the dust to the UN headquarters building on 42nd street in New York City—and connects health, agriculture, and literacy projects being undertaken in each space to the benevolence and oversight of the UN (Figure 9.6).

World Without End perfectly expresses the contradictions of UNESCO’s discourse of global citizenship and human rights. It is told from a Western perspective (by dint of both the sonic and the visual address to the viewer), while, at the same time, attempting to decentralize the UN project by

53 Smyth, ‘Roots of Community Development’, p. 419.
presenting all the experts shown in the film as visibly racialized people from the regions and states depicted. With the exception of the narrator, no one else is heard speaking on the soundtrack, which, instead, uses ‘ethnic’-sounding folk music to signify its movement between Asia and Latin America. Thus, *World Without End* also enacts a sonic colour line keeping non-Western speakers from being heard while, nevertheless, keeping their bodies squarely within the frame.

After undertaking media health education work in UNESCO missions in China and India, Norman McLaren cryptically wrote: ‘I have come to feel certain that this Fundamental Education is no more than giving aspirin for an abscessed tooth. In the long run perhaps a bad thing.’ 54 It seems likely that McLaren is referring to the discrepancy between the inflated promises of literacy and health campaigns, on the one hand, and the lack of financial resources and political will to carry them through in a way that would fully benefit the people being targeted, on the other. He thus came to the realization of many literacy workers who, much as they may have wanted to ‘reinforce indigenous values’, likely realized that, through their ‘help’ to achieve Western modernization, they ended up contributing to the structural undermining of traditional cultures—often with disastrous results. 55

54 Cited in Dobson, ‘Norman McLaren’, p. 34.
55 Watras ‘UNESCO’s Programme’, p. 237. There were numerous problems with the concept of fundamental education, many of which stemmed from its provenance in colonial educational policy. For instance, UNESCO experts tended to demand competency in a student’s national language. But, in many of the countries being modernized, such as the Philippines, there were numerous indigenous languages. The fundamental education regime thus became implicated in the imposition of national languages, sometimes against the will of speakers of other languages. In other cases, literacy programmes were directly tied to Christian evangelism, with all that entailed. It was clear to many that UNESCO’s conception of literacy was a stark contrast to the
Despite the film’s support for fundamental education, UNESCO’s ambivalence about globalization is clearly depicted in the final section of *World Without End*, in which the narrator anxiously declares that the world’s people are suddenly very close together and that the needs of the Global South can no longer be ignored. The film’s final image is of an upset Asian child at his mother’s breast who turns to confront the camera with an unblinking and unsmiling gaze while an image of the globe is superimposed onto his face (Figure 9.7). Coming as the culmination of a short sequence of images of nine children from different cultures, the image conveys the idea that the world is at a crucial moment, and the film encourages the Western viewer to consider supporting the UN and its agencies as a bulwark against global chaos that will inevitably ensue if the world’s peoples are not provided for. Through the relay of gazes between the child, his mother, and the camera/

socialist literacy programmes that linked peasant literacy to ‘pedagogies of the oppressed’, focussing on consciousness-raising and empowerment rather than labour markets. See Jones, ‘Unesco’; Watras, ‘UNESCO’s Programme’; Dorn and Ghodsee, ‘Cold War Politicization’. For more on the presumed links between literacy and social progress, see Graff, ‘Literacy Myth’, and Druick, ‘Myth of Media Literacy’.
viewer, the sequence sutures the viewer to the film’s subjects in a single homogenous space and time, making it a perfect example of UNESCO’s one-world organizational logic.

Orchestrating Diversity

In the UNESCO films under examination here, common strategies for visualizing the world include showing massive crowds, an image of the globe, or the flags of the member states of the UN. With the totality in mind, each film finds a way to focus on one particular group, geographical location, or national context, either through zooming in on one part of the globe or one national flag, or by using musical cues to indicate a shift in location.

_World Without End_’s ending, with the image of the child’s face superimposed on the globe, balances its opening image of a spinning globe, over which the narrator says: ‘I am a man myself. And I think that everything which has to do with human beings has something to do with me, too.’ This normative expression of humanism (everything human is important to all humans) is resonant with the sentiment of UNESCO’s _Statement on Race_ (1950), which ends with the statement: ‘For every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main, because he is involved in mankind.’

UNESCO’s visual culture attempted to find ways to represent this sentiment of unity in diversity through the lens of humanism. Often, this involved a dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular, or a database logic that enabled the comparison of the compendium of ways of human life across different contexts.

_Books for All_ (1954), a televised film about literacy made to celebrate the opening of the UNESCO-sponsored public library in Delhi, includes one of the most ingenious strategies for integrating a database of global examples into the film’s structure. The eleven-minute film begins with a full four-minute montage of people—mainly adults—in classrooms around Asia and Africa being taught how to read and write. In lieu of the narration found in _The Task Ahead_ and _World Without End_, a montage of musical styles cues the viewer’s virtual travel around the globe. At the four-minute mark, the film changes tack and begins to focus exclusively on shots of Delhi and the opening of the library by President Jawaharlal Nehru. The film goes on to chronicle the many spaces, patrons, and activities of the library until, 60 seconds before the end, a film is threaded, the lights are dimmed, and an

56 UNESCO, _Statement on Race_, p. 347.
audience of children watches an abbreviated version of the global montage that opened the film, only this time without the focus on literacy. The film thus takes the viewer from being in the typical position of an educational film audience to being—via the film within the film—once removed from that position, the film’s own rhetorical strategies laid bare.57

The correlate of the visual dialectic between the universal and the particular seen in the visual illustration of many of UNESCO’s undertakings is the strategy of placing spatially disparate peoples in the same time frame. Central to UNESCO’s visual culture was an attempt to orchestrate the world’s diversity into a common cause. By placing everyone in the world within a unified time and space—however illusory—and making many of the projects comparative, the work often relies on the cross-section strategy that evolved in the interwar period.58 The two groups watching the same filmstrip in Mondsee Seminar, the peasants in Thailand and Mexico in World Without End, and the literacy learners around Asia and Africa in Books for All, are all elements of the cross-section strategy seen most fully in the 1955 Family of Man photography exhibit. More than the feeling of a global village, this strategy addresses the world’s diversity on a comparative humanist grid. Ironically, as Lévi-Strauss pointed out in his essay ‘Race and History’, the contact through colonialism, travel, commerce, and the media of globalization would inevitably reduce the diversity UNESCO purported to celebrate.

Human Rights and Biocapital

As this exploration of UNESCO’s film and visual media work of the late 1940s and early 1950s indicates, in the immediate post-war world, biopolitics—the

57 The Task Ahead, World Without End, Hungry Minds, and Article 55 (1951, United Nations Film Board) all use the motif of the globe. Books for All, The Task Ahead, and World Without End use the motif of large crowds in motion seem from above. World Without End and The Price of Peace, a United Nations newsreel from 1951 that features short speeches from representatives to the United Nations, use the motif of the crescent of flags of member nations to represent a global comity.

58 Cowan, Walter Ruttmann. As I have argued elsewhere, this visualization of statistics creates a kind of fiction at the heart of documentary, breathing life into what are, after all, only arbitrary categories to begin with (Druick, Projecting Canada). At the national level, this is a form of ‘government realism’, not unlike what James C. Scott has called ‘seeing like a state’ (Scott, Seeing). At the international level, this operates as a new form of governmentality, potentially placing everyone in the world into the same comparative grid. Children were often used to depict the promises of the new world order. See Rabin, ‘Social History’.
governance of populations—brushed up against the promotion of culture and learning in intriguing ways, lending a disciplinary dimension to the liberal humanism being expounded. Modernization, democratization, and health were all explicitly tied to techniques of communication that were meant to forge the modern citizen in a global public sphere. The world was presented as newly globalized—seemingly through the neutral mechanism of technology—and this, in turn, was seen to have facilitated the movement of people and ideas. The opposing systems of the post-war world's superpowers were equally obscured by the studied apoliticism of UNESCO's functionalist rhetoric. The health of the population was explicitly linked to the use of science to debunk the divisive and meaningless concept of 'race' and to unite humanity. And the emphasis on public-formation often belied the fact that the figures through which the discourses of human rights were acted out appear to be the docile bodies of biopolitical regimes, often little more than anonymous archetypes in the family of man.

Even though the family of man discourse emphasizes the universality of the human condition, UNESCO's tendency in practice was to bifurcate its representational strategies between north and south. Despite the fact that civilization is repeatedly framed in UNESCO materials as common and universal, in its films, people in the Global South—such as the woman receiving the treatment in Haiti—are mainly shown to be complying with the modernization plans of the Global North, which are presented as a disinterested means of human progress. Meanwhile, in the Global North, the recent conflicts are reframed as misunderstandings based on the lack of knowledge about the value of cultural diversity. Yet, even as the category of 'race' is being debunked and disavowed by UNESCO's public statements, it is renewed nonetheless—if unconsciously—through the relationship of north to south being reinscribed into both the media texts and the media flows. This is something that, with the expansion of the ranks of postcolonial nations, would become the subject of the decolonizing work of the late 1950s and after.59

As I've explored here, in the first post-war decade, UNESCO's visual education projects quickly evolved their global biopolitical tenor. While presenting itself as an organization neutrally supporting the use of

59 The Non-Aligned Movement of African and Asian UN member nations met for the first time in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, and later pushed for a project of international understanding that led to the establishment of the Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values—in many ways, the beginning of the postcolonial movement at the UN (Wong, 'Relocating East and West').
media to promote human rights in a newly crafted global public sphere, UNESCO’s mandate took shape in the application of technological fixes and the development of human capital in a global biopolitical regime. As I’ve tried to indicate, UNESCO’s actual programmes tended to take place at the most practical of levels. The films thus show people packing books into crates or threading a projector, ploughing a field or receiving an inoculation. For all the talk of humanism, then, UNESCO’s representational practices tended along much more prosaic lines. Thus, although UNESCO was putatively engaged with ideas—with education, science, and culture—it can actually be seen alongside the UN’s other ‘technobiological’ agencies operating at the disciplinary level of bodies. This explains why inoculation and farming techniques were the subjects of its films as often as was the genius of scientists and artists. Paradoxically, in order to bring about macro-level improvements, the operation of cultures and civilizations needed to be statistically mapped and improved at micro levels that were often fundamentally dehumanizing. To consider an individual as a vector of disease, for instance, is not usually, at the same time, to present them as the subject of history and the bearer of human rights. The universal values of humanism were often held apart from the actual processes of modernization and technology transfer thought to be the first steps in the establishment of human rights.

UNESCO’s public relations and educational film work is telling, then, in terms of both what it displays and what it obscures. Discourses of individualism, freedom of expression, communication, and human rights were mobilized to justify the use of technical expertise in development. Yet, the emphasis on universalism only barely obscures the Eurocentrism that informed the organization; its express debunking of ‘race’ is complicated by the visual treatment of non-Europeans as bodies in need of disciplining in relation to the global system.

Global images of the sort produced under the auspices of UNESCO mapped a complex vision encompassing the lofty goals of world civilization, on one hand, and formation of human or biological capital, on the other. After the war, UNESCO lent moral authority to a transition from colonialism to globalization. Its philosophy also sparked a racist backlash in the United States and fostered disillusionment in the activists and progressive educators from around the world who had tried to believe in its promise. That the prefigurative politics of the agency were not totally obscured by its imperial legacies and aggressive capitalist futures, is testament to their deep and
abiding utopian promise. UNESCO partakes in a complex international history, to be sure. But the contradictions involved in attempts to operationalize ideas of universalism, anti-racism, and peace through technical assistance and to transform colonial regimes into liberal democratic ones in the post-war years lives on in the visual records of the biopolitical initiatives sponsored by the agency.

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