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FILMS ABOUT AGRICULTURE AND  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA\*

by

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FILMS ABOUT AGRICULTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

IN LATIN AMERICA

by Fritz Albert

This paper discusses motion pictures which deal with agricultural and economic development in Latin America. It is not concerned with film as art, but rather with film as a tool--as a practical device for meeting specific communications needs in development.

When a jury met in Berlin for the first time in 1960 to evaluate agricultural films, it agreed that there are basically two types of such films: those made for agriculture and those made about agriculture. I will use these same prepositions in examining Latin American films. These films are either directed at farmers, or designed for non-farmers or foreign audiences to inform them about agricultural and economic development.

At this point, it would be helpful to know a little about the dimensions of this subject. How many such films exist? How are they used?

To my knowledge, there is no complete inventory of such films. I would guess, however, that there might be approximately 150 films serving agriculture and rural development within Latin America, and possibly as many as 100 other films which report about it. If one includes films outdated technically or with respect to content, both groups might almost double.

Teaching and extension leaders in Latin America seem to agree that films can be effective for development purposes. However, except for groups in Mexico and Colombia, I do not know of any organization which is devoted to the systematic production of films or film series in specific subject matter areas or for specific audiences.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, most filmmaking operations in Latin America are sporadic, one-shot efforts which, though they undoubtedly fill a need, do not constitute a steady teaching or extension resource on which teachers or advisors can depend. There exists no complete series of films on any given subject matter area (e.g., plant production or poultry) or for any specific audiences (rice growers, cattlemen, dryland farmers, etc.).

At this point, let me describe briefly the Mexican film program.

The following titles give an idea of this program.

Conozca su Suelo 12 minutes, color, sound	Know your Soil
El Cultivo del Frijol 17 minutes, color, sound	Growing Beans
La Cria de Pollitos 15 minutes, color, sound	Raising Baby Chicks
El Huerto Familiar 13 minutes, color, sound	The Family Garden

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The following films are available in Colombia:

INCORA (National Agrarian Reform Institute): 20 for extension use and 6 for school use, all produced by INCORA by fall, 1968. In addition, 19 produced elsewhere are available in the INCORA library. Most of these came from Shell Oil Co., Venezuela.

ICA (Colombian Institute for Agribusiness): 3 films (two are ICA-produced, and one was procured from Mexico).

Peace Corps and U.S. Information Agency: total of 7 films available.

The above films are designed for small farmers, and are used in meetings arranged by village committees or the advisory service. Some are also suited for school use.

Here is another cross section:

Abone su Maiz y Coseche Mas 15 minutes, color, sound	Fertilize your Corn and Harvest More
Forraje Ensilado 17 minutes, color, sound	Silage
Mejores Praderas para Buen Ganado 16 minutes, color, sound	Better Grasses for Good Cattle
Un Ganadero, su Rancho y Zacata Merkeron 13 minutes, color, sound	The Stockman, his Farm and Merkeron Grass

All of these are designed for the small livestock producer. The titles alone indicate their objectives: better livestock and more and better forage. An attempt is made not to include too much information in any one film. Each film stresses one certain aspect. This "dosage" is well wrapped in a convincing package which is small enough to be remembered.

A glance at the itinerary of some of these films gives a better understanding of how they are used:

Tocuaro, Mich.	Calle	Dic. 20	Publico General
Erongaricuario, Mich.	Calle	Dic. 20	Publico General
Leon, Gto.	Exposicion	Ene. 17-21	Publico General
Tochimilco, Pue.	Escuela	Ene. 22	Campesinos
Cd. Madero, Pamps.	Escuela	Ene. 26	Estudiantes y Profesores

Huachinango, Pue.	Plaza Municipal	Feb. 21-23	Publico General
Iguala, Gro.	Feria Agricola	Feb. 24-28	Publico General
Tacambaro, Mich.	Iglesia	Marzo 1	Campeños
Taxco, Gro.	Calle	Marzo 3	Publico General

These films are made by two persons: an agricultural college graduate (ingeniero agrónomo) and a photographer. They are employed by the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and available to whatever sub-agency needs them. Needless to say, they have many helpers on any given film, but these are not permanent co-workers. Agricultural researchers and extension workers give assistance in preparing the film outline and in shooting. A private recording studio does their sound work. The Ministry's farm radio specialist voices narrations for them. But the basic two-man team is responsible for the films' approach, content, shooting, editing, and completion of the sound work. Their laboratory work is done in the United States, not in Mexico where only 35 mm color processing and printing are available.

Films are just one means of reaching farmers and rural audiences. I do not have to list the other media which are or can be employed to diffuse information. However, the scarcity of media in Latin America, as opposed to the abundance of media in the industrialized countries, makes it imperative that each medium be used to its utmost advantage.

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Unfortunately, as Brown has pointed out, such mass media as newspapers, magazines, films, and television rarely provide content that is

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Marion R. Brown, "Diffusion of Technical Agricultural Information in Chile," Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1968, p. 6.

relevant to local or functional development needs because of their:

- centralized selection of content;
- emphasis on technical performance;
- preference for content with the widest possible appeal;
- preference for audiences which are already participating in a market economy.

A film program designed to contribute to development must find a way to overcome these limitations and respond to local and functional needs. An adequate program will recognize that:

- many films are needed;
- content should be carefully geared to specific audiences and areas;
- film style should be consonant with cultural patterns of its audience;
- production technique and distribution of films should not reflect the traditions of industrialized nations, but must be responsive to existing situations in Latin America.

Perhaps teachers and extension workers in Latin America will agree that such a film policy would make sense.

So why don't more countries have such a policy? I have asked this question of several administrators and policymakers. They politely respond that such a program is impossible because talent and resources are too scarce. This answer is true as far as it goes, but as one becomes more familiar with the situation he sees more profound reasons behind these superficial explanations. Given the realities of political life in Latin America, policymakers are reluctant to start programs that take three or four years to get off the ground. They doubt that any educational or mass media program can survive for very long unless it has established itself very firmly and grown deep roots very quickly. The educational film is a slow-blooming plant. Its promoters know they would have to

train filmmakers. This takes at least two years, if you are lucky enough to find people with the right background and inclination. Then they would have to set up their operation within a government or semi-government agency and make sure that salaries were good enough to support full-time devotion to the task. In France or in Germany or in England such filmmaking operations could be established on a free lance basis, and very likely this would be the most efficient as well as the most satisfying way of doing the job. In most Latin American countries this will not work--men with special training will soon find work where the pay-off is quicker than it is in development programs. The film team, then, must be a government or a semi-government operation and this is difficult. How easy it is to establish, but how difficult to maintain, long-run programs of this kind can be seen in the extension services of Latin America.

A partial list of government agencies involved in the diffusion of agricultural technology includes:<sup>3</sup>

Departamento de Extensión Agrícola  
 Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario  
 Corporación de Reforma Agraria  
 Departamento de Defensa Agrícola  
 Departamento de Conservación de Suelos y Aguas  
 Servicio de Cooperación Técnica of the Ministry of Agriculture  
 Corporación de Fomento de la Producción  
 Industria Azucarera Nacional, S.A.  
 Servicio de Equipos Agrícolas Mecanizados  
 Banco del Estado  
 Dirección de Informaciones y Radio Difusión de la Presidencia  
 de la República

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<sup>3</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 42.

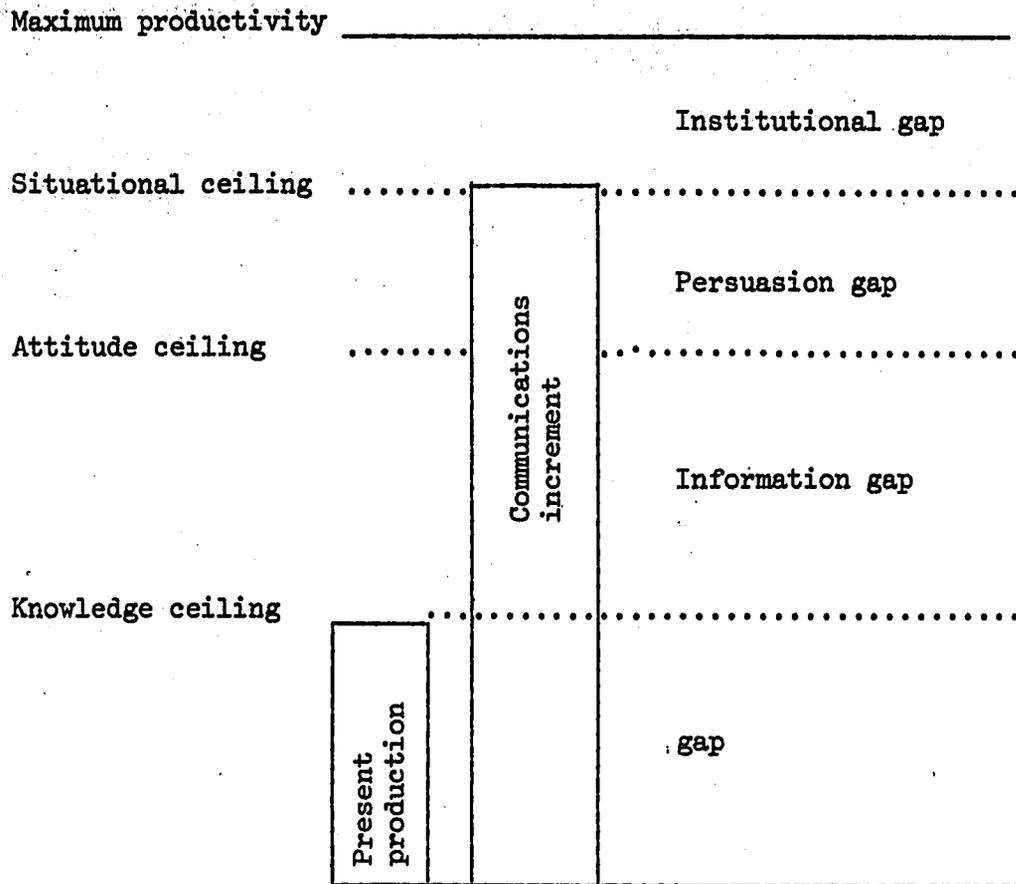
Private organizations and semi-private agencies include:

Corporación de Venta de Salitre y Yodo  
Compradores de Maravilla, S.A.  
Agroservicio  
Fundación de Vida Rural  
Instituto de Educación Rural  
Instituto de Promoción Agraria  
Universidad Católica de Valparaíso  
Sociedad Nacional de Agricultura

Look, for example, at the many extension agencies which Chile has started since World War II. Most had a short life span or have kept alive only by competing for funds and field personnel. Some of these services operated with support from some foreign assistance project. The government of the country established one "advisory service" after another, creating a large bureaucracy with very few men in the field and with many surviving functionaries at the top. Funds are easiest to obtain when quick results can be promised--but quick results in agricultural extension work seldom mean development in the sense of providing a better life for a majority.

Even when an effective and well-supported information team is in operation, the filmmaker soon finds that institutional and structural factors make his job very difficult. He learns that he must operate within a rather narrow margin between what the farmers already know and use and what they are capable of knowing and using, given the situational restraints within which they must work.

In a report of a two-year diffusion study in Chile, Brown uses this diagram:<sup>4</sup>



The situational ceiling is set by existing physical, economic, institutional, and technological factors including Mosher's five essentials of agricultural development: markets, technology, inputs, incentives, and transportation.

The attitude ceiling is fixed by the farmers' willingness to experiment. Farmers in underdeveloped areas are often characterized as irrationally traditional and fatalistic, refusing to accept new ideas that are "clearly" to their benefit.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 35.

Brown and others who have substantial field experience argue that what is often regarded as the "attitude ceiling" and the major barrier to development is in fact the "situational ceiling." They observe that there often exists a generally favorable attitude toward modern technology among the "backward" farmers, though they do not doubt that purely psychological or attitudinal factors can and do affect the acceptance of new technology.

This knowledge ceiling is set by what the farmer is already aware of and using.

The point which Brown makes and which I would like to emphasize is that data which fall outside the "information or persuasion gap" will not be locally or functionally relevant, no matter if it is carried by film, circular letter, demonstration, or other method.

For this reason, technical information for farmers should either be limited and tailored so that it will fit the existing situation, or it should be part of a program that pushes up the "situational ceiling."

Here we are concerned with informational aspects of such programs as land reform, supervised credit, marketing improvement, and production research.

Such technical information, of course, should not be limited to providing information alone. It also should persuade. Look again at Brown's diagram for a concrete example. Assume we are dealing with an area where potatoes, the major crop, are grown by small landowners with little or no schooling. Yields are very low, and no commercial fertilizer is used.

If we are responsible communicators, we will need to ask several relevant questions in order to locate the situational ceiling before making a film which is to play a part in helping these subsistence farmers:

Will the farmer be able to utilize more potatoes by eating more and selling more?

How far must he go to sell them? How will he get them to market?

What will happen to the market price? Will it remain unchanged, decrease, or possibly even collapse with the increased supply?

Will there be enough seed potatoes available of the varieties recommended by the film?

Will the type of fertilizer needed be available in quantity? Can this fertilizer be bought on credit, and at what rate?

And last but not least, has research shown that the recommended potatoes can be grown without undue hazard from weather, disease, and insect pests?

At this point, some might ask, "What has all of this to do with filmmaking?" If these conditions are not met, a collapse of prices, unavailability of the fertilizer, or a destructive pest might damage the credibility of the "educational film medium" as well as that of the organization which has used the film in its "development effort." At the very least the whole filmmaking effort would be wasted.

Even with careful attention to the situational relevance of a new idea or technique, it is often necessary to break through an attitude barrier in order to get the idea accepted. Film--perhaps more than any other mass medium--can play a very important role here.

It is important that the message be presented in a culturally consonant form. Are the landscape, people, houses, and tools from the world of our farm audience or are they from a dream world? Too many new and strange items in the film might draw attention away from the film's real message. The only thing different in the film should be the new practice--nothing else. Aiming for cultural consonance will also mean that you need many films. Chile, for instance, might need one for the central region, another for the Araucanians and possibly a third for the German settlement area in the South. Just as important as "cultural consonance" in all of the film's background and surroundings is the appearance of its people. They should be types which the audience likes, types with whom it can identify.

Also important in overcoming the persuasion gap is the implied reward that the farmer will receive for using the practice which the film recommends. To continue with our example of potato production, for some it will be a good yield of healthy potatoes. Farmers take pride in good products. The film is an excellent medium with which to emphasize a good potato yield, perhaps in a close-up sequence. It might be a demonstration of a series of dishes which can be prepared from potatoes, or it might be the monetary reward from the sale which will permit the campesino to make purchases for his family, himself, or his farm. Or it might be respect and admiration shown by his neighbors. As a rule pride in the product, standing in the community, or monetary reward can be appealed to as motivating forces. If the filmmaker knows the people and customs of the area he might be able to point in a subtle way to a reward which is specific to the area.

Important in persuasion is the reputation of the agency responsible for making and showing the film. Important, too, is the source of the information or the name of the subject matter specialist or of respected farmers who have cooperated in making the film. I know of one successful farm program in Latin America which is a government operation but which intentionally appears to have no connections whatever with the government. On the other hand, I have observed that a foundation's reputation is often emphasized in connection with the introduction of new grain and corn varieties.

Educators like to simplify, to reduce a process to its bare essentials. Simplification is a good thing, particularly in classroom teaching, but when a film is intended to be the last step before adoption, it ought to point out that if the practice is not rigidly followed it might lead to failure. There is no reason to make things too simple. Farmers have observed nature for a long time and know about complexities, and they have no trouble comprehending interrelationships that are clearly presented.

Finally, it might be a good thing to remember that a film will be shown at a village square in the open, with people seated on the ground, or, at best, in the town hall or a storage building. It is not a gala showing. For example, we might not have enough voltage and the picture might not be the brightest--we cannot rely for persuasive impact on perfection of the showing. However, even a less than perfect presentation can have a noticeable "persuasive" effect simply because somebody cared, came to the village, and relayed a message

Before turning to films which have been made about agriculture and economic development in Latin America, let me briefly touch on two points which have to do first with film technique for Latin America and second with films which could be made available from the industrialized countries for use in Latin America.

#### Film Technique for Latin America

Films directed at large rural audiences should employ simple techniques. The "how-to" type of film in a somewhat documentary style is not only the most effective but also the most economical type of film which can be made. There is no advantage in translating the film's message into a "photo-play" or in shooting part or all of the film with synchronized sound. Narration permits more flexibility and consumes less time and money. Most of all, it can be adapted to audience levels.

Too often technically over-refined films are made with an eye to film competition or a sponsor or a gatekeeper. The advantage of technically advanced film treatment has yet to be demonstrated, considering the messages, audiences, and play-back conditions which concern us.

The "simplicity" question is more difficult with the "color" or "no color" issue. While color complicates the film for the filmmaker, it probably simplifies the message for the viewer by making it more realistic and concrete. Audiences inexperienced with film are more intrigued with color pictures than they are with black and white. Also, color lengthens the attention span of a viewer.

Possibly in this area the industrialized countries could give a helping hand, by providing a color laboratory to which all Latin American countries could have access.

#### Films from Industrialized Countries

Many films made and used in the industrialized countries could be used for specific purposes with limited audiences in Latin America--such subjects as "digestive organs of a cow," "methods of determining butterfat in milk," or "principles of threshing machines." Technical schools and universities could improve their teaching with such pictures which treat basic principles that are unusually relevant.

Such technical films often use superimposed words in scenes and in animated diagrams which too often make their transfer into another language difficult and costly. Instead of just exchanging the title section and the sound track, reshooting of these words becomes necessary. I would like to suggest that such films replace words with internationally accepted codes and isotypes, employing a symbolic drawing of an ear of corn instead of the word "corn" or "corn yield," for example.<sup>5</sup>

Let me now turn to films which report about Latin America's agricultural and economic development. In the words of Jean Marie Ackermann--the film critic of the "International Development Review"--these films are "uniquely uncatalogued and elusive." In looking at these films, though, it might be advantageous to subdivide them in terms of

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<sup>5</sup> See Otto Neurath, International Picture Language (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1936).

audiences which they reach. In doing so I would differentiate three groups:

- 1) One group of film is designed for students of development. It builds on existing interest and aims to give an additional dimension to systematic teaching.
- 2) Another group of films reaches limited audiences and special interest groups with a promotional message describing the success of a particular commercial product or development project.
- 3) A third group of films is intended for general audiences. These films have wide distribution via television and schools in the industrialized countries. Their sponsors are usually detached from the projects they portray in developing countries.

The first group, specific films aimed mainly at the instruction of students of development, are rare as are other instructional materials on this subject. Often the new student must rely solely on research reports and articles in scholarly journals for information about development in Latin America. Early in the sixties the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin decided that we should make films to supplement written sources and to add a visual dimension to the students' understanding of Latin American realities. At the same time we felt that such films could become a benchmark for comparative studies. Land Tenure Center films, which are very simple in their form, try to give an "objective" view of several areas of Bolivia, Colombia, and Chile. They amount to several hours of screen time and find some use outside of the "development studies" at Wisconsin and other Latin American study centers in the U.S. and Latin America, particularly in the orientation and training of Peace Corps members.

This type of film is also produced in other subject areas by the Goettingen Institute,<sup>6</sup> which does not aim for a film with a beginning, a middle part, and an end, or a "curve" of dramatic events, but which tries to bring a segment of reality to well-prepared viewers in an unemotional setting.

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Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film.

The production of Land Tenure Center film footage is guided by experts who have studied the region and the problem for many years and know the locations and the people.

Films in the second group (promotional films describing the success of particular development projects) can be easily spotted just by looking for the film's sponsor. These are the kind of films in which "natives" dance a "limbo" or engage in some other cultural rite which expresses the depth of the sponsor's anthropological empathy. Soon the viewer learns that what they are expressing is pleasure and gratification at some project or some commercial product which the film will tell you has become the crux of a better life for the natives. I have seen such films praising a herbicide, a credit union, and a wide variety of government programs, foreign and domestic. They usually report success and omit issues that are difficult to explain. They almost always are premature, because they necessarily "report" on something still in its early stages. In numerical terms these pictures are the most abundant, but fortunately their distribution is limited.

The last type of film--which has broad distribution via TV and schools--is of far more consequence. This group includes some unforgettable documentaries like the one in which Armand Deleule, the director of the motion picture section of France's Ministry of Agriculture, points to the institutional barriers which make development so difficult and improbable in Latin America. Another such film reports about the Vicos project of Cornell University. In this film Allen Holmberg tells how Peruvian Indians--conditioned by centuries of serfdom--become self-sufficient and self-governing. Jorge Ruiz and Willard van Dyke, both

men long familiar with the Latin American scene, gave the film a rare mark: they subordinated form to content. The film enjoyed extremely wide distribution in commercial television and schools.

The success of such pictures is only in small measure connected with monetary outlay; they succeed when there is coordination between the advice and guidance by field researchers and the skill of competent filmmakers.

But also in this area--pictures made for general audiences--you will find disappointing examples. A film under the title "Oil, Coffee and Democracy" comes to mind. In this film, while the picture shows the exterior of the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá the narration goes something like this: "Outside it is U.S. architecture; inside it is communist ideology." Both statements are nonsense. The buildings reflect a German architectural school; the architect was German. The remark about the inside is equally careless and uninformed. A catch phrase in a film narrative is, for the outsider filming in Latin America, too easy a way to avoid explanations which exceed the capacity of a superficial and not very deeply informed reporter. I am not making an ideological observation when I say this. Instead, I am saying that in political matters as in others, far too many films about Latin America take their audiences on the tourist trail. Perhaps with the exception of a few sequences most of the footage is shot within one hour's driving distance from a tourist hotel, oil field, or mining town where there are "bearable" accommodations for the film crew. They show only the "opened" areas. If they include hard to reach localities, then the narration tells

more about how difficult it was to get there than about the location's significance.

One other frequent fault also deserves comment. Irrelevant objects, because of their beauty or their spectacular appearance, are often over-emphasized. The film crew's director or the cameraman, if they are not well informed about the country and clear about the objectives of their film, will too easily be led astray by objects, scenes, or persons that are "filmic" in themselves and hence almost imperceptibly become a central part of the story. Actually they may be detrimental to the film's message, yet they are so easy to capture, and they are very attractive on the screen. Even the film editor will find space for them. Beautiful girls, breathtaking views, animated action are stereotypes in the film trade. It is far more difficult to find filmic aspects and meaningful angles which express complex ideas and issues rather than objects. Seeing them and utilizing them comes with the understanding of the problems. This understanding cannot be achieved in a short visit without expert guidance from competent people on the scene.

Films can be useful in development. They can communicate useful information to people in the developing countries and they can communicate the problems of development to the rest of the world.