

***The projection of development:  
cinematic representation as an(other)  
source of authoritative knowledge?***

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## **Abstract**

Popular representations of development need to be taken seriously (though not uncritically) as sources of authoritative knowledge, not least because this is how most people in the global North (and elsewhere) 'encounter' development issues. To this end, and building on the broader agenda presented in a previous paper on exploring the usefulness of literary representations of development, we consider three different types of cinematic representations of development: films providing uniquely instructive insights, those unhelpfully eliding and simplifying complex processes, and those that, with the benefit of historical hindsight, usefully convey a sense of the prevailing assumptions that guided and interpreted the efficacy of development-related interventions at a particular time and place. We argue that the commercial and technical imperatives governing the production of contemporary films, and 'popular' films in particular, generate a highly variable capacity to 'accurately' render key issues in development, and thereby heighten their potential to both illuminate and obscure those issues.

**Keywords:** development knowledge, representation, film, cinema, narrative authority, popular understanding

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## Introduction

The wide-ranging and intrinsically public nature of development means that getting to grips with broader, more popular understandings of the concept is critical to improving the way development policies are conceived, debated, implemented and assessed. Partly for this reason, we made a case in a paper entitled 'The fiction of development' that novels ought to be considered potentially valuable sources of information about development, since they both supplement and challenge more familiar forms of academic or policy knowledge, and may also qualify or even overtly challenge mainstream thinking about knowledge authority (Lewis *et al.*, 2008). In that paper, we limited our discussion to literary fiction, but we recognised that other forms of fictional representation, such as films and plays, also constituted important communicative mediums for addressing key themes in development. Building on some of the insights of our earlier article – and as promised in one of its footnotes – this article extends our arguments to the interface between cinema and development.<sup>1</sup>

This paper aims to introduce the subject of cinema and development as a potentially fruitful area for future research and, using some brief and selective examples, to draw out some preliminary insights. In recent years, for instance, relatively popular films such as *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005) have told stories that attempt both to entertain and to engage audiences with important global development issues. What is distinctive about how development issues are rendered in such films, as compared with scholarly publications and policy reports? We do not attempt to be comprehensive and – as was also the case in our previous paper on literature – we make no claim to be drawing upon a 'representative' body of films about development.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the paper draws on a range of personally selected historical and contemporary examples, which include both Western and some developing country films, in order to explore the power and limitations of cinematographic representation as an(other) authoritative source of development knowledge. Our focus is on drama, rather than on documentary forms of film. We write primarily from the perspective of development studies and we do not engage in any depth with film theory in this paper, but we hope that this exploratory work can help to stimulate such a conversation. We are also acutely conscious that our selection is drawn primarily from popular films that have been influential in the global North. We hope to encourage further work that can give due coverage to films from India, Nigeria, South Africa, South Korea and elsewhere, many of which explicitly address development issues. These clear limitations notwithstanding, for present purposes we focus on three key issues, namely:

- (i) The nature of film as a representational medium for development concerns;
- (ii) Some of the potential pitfalls associated with film as a representational medium for certain specific development-related issues and contexts;

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the books discussed in our original article, such as Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* or Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, have been made into films. While it might be worthwhile to compare themes across different media, we mainly focus here on a fresh selection of development-related films.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Zaniello (2007) summarises over 200 films on globalisation. While Zaniello's stance is one of explicit critique, our focus here is on the distinctive contribution that films bring to development debates.

- (iii) The way that cinema shapes, but also fundamentally reflects, popular conceptions of development in the West.

What we hope to show is that, like any form of representation, film brings both strengths and limitations to the ways that it conveys complex issues.<sup>3</sup> Although we argue that films can be a legitimate and potentially important medium for representation, both intrinsically and instrumentally, we also highlight issues and problems in the underlying nature of their particular representational power, as well as the inherent ambiguities associated with films as fundamentally contextualised forms of representation. Awareness of these strengths and limitations is especially important for teaching development, given the increasing incorporation of film into university classroom discussions and online debates.

## Film and development

Few feature films have been concerned directly with agency-led development interventions or projects. One exception is Martin Campbell's feature film, *Beyond Borders* (2003). It stars Angelina Jolie as an aid worker who abandons a comfortable socialite life in London to become an aid worker in Ethiopia. She participates in events reminiscent of the Ethiopian famine of 1984-85 and the international humanitarian relief effort that followed. It was marketed with the rather dismal tagline 'In a place she didn't belong, among people she never knew, she found a way to make a difference'. The film was neither a critical nor a box office success, but it did attempt to raise some critical issues about the politics of aid along the way.<sup>4</sup>

More common, however, are films that engage tangentially with a variety of broader development issues – war, conflict and violence, humanitarianism, commerce, poverty, politics, and more – as part of their setting or plot. One trope that emerges very frequently, however, is contentious interaction between people from rich and poor countries. Indeed, the divide between rich and poor – or more precisely, between Westerners and 'locals', as most of these films we discuss tell their stories from a Western point of view – is arguably *the* key concern in most films that can be categorised as 'development films'.

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that considering the nature of the audiences for which these films are produced is also an important issue, although for reasons of space we have chosen not to focus on this particular topic in any depth. Many of the films that we discuss in this paper have been made specifically for Western audiences – even if they also circulate globally – and that this conditions their general tenor, which tends to be critical but overall offers a non-radical perspective on 'development'. At the same time, to a large extent this is very much an organic process, and we would not want to suggest that the contemporary 'development film' business is (necessarily) a propaganda machine in the way that the Colonial Film Unit, which produced instructional films for African subjects of the British Empire, for example, was in the past.

<sup>4</sup> Angelina Jolie had become a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador in August 2001, after becoming interested in humanitarian issues while working on *Tomb Raider* in Cambodia the year before. While filming *Beyond Borders* in Namibia, she reportedly visited Angolan refugees (<http://www.amazingwomenrock.com/role-models/angelina-jolie-actress/unhcr-goodwill-ambassador.html>, accessed 25 August 2011).

Recent films such *Blood Diamond* (2006), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), or even *Casino Royale* (2006) and *Quantum of Solace* (2008), fall into this category.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, in addition to focusing on the divide between rich and poor and outsiders and locals, their narratives are soon complicated by additional storylines that centre on exposing and exploring the tensions *within* certain key groups – such as pharmaceutical companies, the military, the media, aid organisations, governments, or citizen groups – on one or both sides of the divide. So while the initial focus may be a deadly conflict in a developing country – whether it be a ‘civil war’, a humanitarian intervention, an outright invasion, or drugs trade-related violence – the central drama concerns the deep moral ambiguities, personal misgivings and overt power struggles that the protagonists, whether as reluctant, accidental or noble heroes, find themselves navigating. Indeed, much of the narrative *animus* turns out to be driven by the crises, contradictions and greed among those (at least nominally) on their own side.

This kind of narrative arc, done carefully, bears repeating, and as a depiction of ‘reality’ may improve on what passes today for news coverage of such events, where a two-minute (at best) loop provides viewers with estimates of body counts and property damage, and explains the carnage as an outcome of a contest between the two most proximate actors (see Chouliaraki, 2010). Despite being generally plagued by an audience-appealing imperative to juxtapose relatively clear fault lines of good and evil, the best films in this genre seek to complicate these categories. They suggest that the very fluidity and ambiguity of virtue and vice at any given time and place may itself be a factor driving human tragedy, even as it can also, occasionally, provide narrow windows of opportunity that the fortunate, the persistent or the deftly strategic can exploit. In the acclaimed film, *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), for example, one might initially think the distinctions between good and evil would be relatively clear and straightforward; but the film does a careful job of showing that there was plenty of blame to go around, with the atrocities initiated, sustained and intensified by a complicated storm of local, national, regional, and international factors.<sup>6</sup>

If moral ambiguities are well-worn tropes in commercial films, much less so are themes seeking to convey how highly educated, mostly well-meaning people come to preside over vast technologies of decision-making that, by privileging certain forms of knowledge-claiming over others, become complicit in perpetuating (sometimes intensifying) widespread human suffering. Beyond the world of familiar contests between good and evil people (doctors, drug lords) engaged in good and evil practices (saving lives, money laundering), there exists a more pervasive everyday reality in the international aid business, one in which billions of dollars must be mobilised and dispersed with a minimum of fuss in the service of ‘projects’ that strive to meet objectives such as enhancing access to education, water, jobs and justice, among others. Countries and companies have a mixture of motives for engaging in such activities, the efficacy of which is (for the most part) inherently uncertain, and mediated via (even as it actively sustains) a complex political economy of domestic and international actors. How this pervasive uncertainty is resolved – and what imperatives it

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the popular (Western) films on development are adaptations of books. We are unable to say whether this is the result of a wider trend within the film industry to reduce risk by filming books (and making remakes) or whether it reflects a distinctive point about development film making.

<sup>6</sup> Such films tend to personalise moral and political choices in ways that oversimplify reality. As a result, they struggle to convey wider structural logics that underpin diplomatic and aid architecture and tend to underplay the legacy of colonialism.

generates among constituent actors to sustain the system's legitimacy and validate one's contribution to it – is rarely the subject of cinematic attention.<sup>7</sup>

An illuminating exception in this regard is *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), the biography/documentary<sup>8</sup> of Robert McNamara, the Chief Executive of the Ford Motor Company in the 1950s, US Secretary of Defense for much of the Vietnam War, and between 1968 and 1978 the president of the World Bank. Drawing on his autobiography, *In Retrospect* (McNamara, 1996), the film's signature accomplishment is to show how McNamara, and people like him in other fields, both embodied and reinforced an approach to the management of large, complex enterprises that privileged, above all else, forms of knowledge that could be measured and modelled in mathematical form. They were 'the best and the brightest' (Halberstam, 1972), a rising generation of technocrats who would replace the 'soft' knowledge heretofore associated with intuition, experience and contextual understanding with 'hard' empirical data that could 'objectively' assess the costs and benefits of any given course of action.<sup>9</sup> Compelling images in the film of bombs laden with hand-written cost-benefit equations scrawled on them falling from aircraft, followed by scenes of sheer terror in Vietnamese village as the bombs exploded, conveyed more powerfully than the written word how deep was the empirical disjuncture and moral gulf between decision-makers and those who bear the brunt of the physical and psychological consequences. As the film's central metaphor conveys, once one is mired in 'the fog', more and better 'objective' data only gets you so far; indeed, overly relying on or deferring to it can all too easily give rise to an air of confidence and surety that itself become part of the problem. What Alfred North Whitehead (1925: 52) aptly called 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' has never been more graphically displayed.

An additional driving force in *The Fog of War* is that McNamara, in the final years of his life, had openly recognised not only that 'mistakes were made', but that the entire premise of his decision-making apparatus had been fatally flawed. Critics, of course, have chided McNamara for his 'too little too late' concessions. A kinder – and we think more useful – reading would be to note that, far from being heeded, McNamara's hard-won lessons seem destined to be ignored, and his mistakes summarily repeated. In the early 21st century, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been launched on premises that willfully ignore the true human cost and seek justification based on knowledge clearly divorced from contextual realities (see Harford, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While the narrative demands of a 'development drama' structurally lend themselves to a portrait of development focused on individuals rather than structures, this may not be the 'fault' of any particular film, but an inherent issue affecting the genre as a whole. We are grateful to Veronica Davidov for pointing this out to us.

<sup>8</sup> Although our focus is on dramas, many of the points that we raise are clearly also applicable to documentaries, and we consequently felt it important to discuss at least one example of the latter genre. We of course recognise that there also exist numerous differences between films and documentaries (see Eitzen, 1995, for further critical discussion).

<sup>9</sup> This group also included the economic historian, Walt W. Rostow at MIT, whose book, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960), was highly influential among US policy makers.

<sup>10</sup> While striving for empirical rigour is always desirable, the quest today for 'best practice' solutions to development problems, preferably verified by randomised control trials (RCTs), is often at odds with the need to recognise the serious ethical, contextual and political concerns associated with appropriately matching development problems and solutions.

A second general theme often found in development films is 'commerce', where confusion, prejudice, indifference and exploitation drive human suffering through the dynamics and imperatives of market exchange. Here, the central argument is not just that the powerless are shamelessly coerced or manipulated by the powerful, but that these differentials are compounded by, or even directly premised on, the qualitatively different ways in which various groups involved understand the transactions taking place. The introduction of money – an abstraction that is alien to many groups – as the basis of exchange erodes the integrity of social relations and sometimes alters entire cosmologies (Gauri *et al.*, 2011).<sup>11</sup> A classic film in this genre is *The Gods Must be Crazy* (1981), in which a Coke bottle, nonchalantly tossed from a passing aeroplane only to land at the foot of a perplexed San tribesman in rural Africa, becomes the fulcrum around which turn multiple confusions between colonisers and local populations.<sup>12</sup> A similar take on this theme drives the documentary *Cannibal Tours* (1989), in which scenes featuring gluttonous Europeans eating breakfast aboard a boat taking them to meet 'cannibals' in Papua New Guinea are deftly juxtaposed – without needing any voice-over narration – with scenes in the awaiting villages, wherein the 'cannibals' ponder how it is that the Europeans are so wealthy, while carefully rehearsing their strategies for procuring as much money as possible from their strange visitors.

A more recent rendering of the deep ambiguities and contestation surrounding commercial exchange is *También la Lluvia (Even the Rain)* (2010). This is a film about a documentary about a movie depicting the brutal manner in which the (Christian) Spaniards, led by Christopher Columbus, conquered and then suppressed the ('heathen') indigenous populations of Santo Domingo in the 16th century. Making this film are an ambitious but struggling young director and producer, whose careers turn on completing the project and making good on the considerable investments that have been ploughed into making the film; should it fail, they face professional and financial ruin. The film is being made, however, not in coastal, tropical Santo Domingo, but mountainous, temperate Bolivia (because the local actors are much less costly) and against the backdrop, so everyone learns to their consternation, of an increasingly violent dispute in the area between the government and community groups over the privatisation of water, an actual event that took place in Cochabamba in 2000. 'Even the rain', it seems, can be commoditised, bought and sold. Weaving his way into this contentious mix is Daniel, the film's lead indigenous actor but also high-profile critic of the government's policies, who for his efforts is repeatedly beaten and imprisoned, thereby jeopardising the film's tight production schedule.

*Even the Rain* has many messages, but a central one is that while the characters and contexts may change, powerful people fuelled by appropriate combinations of ideas (progress, efficiency, aspiration), interests (money, fame, salvation), and material resources continue to wreak havoc on the less powerful. These tumultuous processes, however, are not just driven by those with money, connections, and guns against noble, innocent villagers,<sup>13</sup> but are also grounded in orthogonal cosmological and epistemological understandings of the purpose(s) and mechanics of life. In a

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<sup>11</sup> An insightful historical analysis of these dynamics, as played out in land exchanges between English colonists and Native Americans in colonial New England, is provided by Cronon (1984).

<sup>12</sup> The film was also criticised at the time for itself reinforcing racial and cultural stereotypes.

<sup>13</sup> One of few representational missteps in *Even the Rain* is the overly noble and internally unified manner in which indigenous populations are portrayed. A more realistic account would surely depict the deep divisions within such communities, and the further unhappiness that flows from capitulation – whether driven by reasonable or selfish motives – by indigenous elites to external commercial or political pressures.

particularly powerful scene, an episode from the 16th century encounter is being re-enacted wherein a band of indigenous women and their children are chased into a river by Spanish soldiers and their attack dogs. The director, Sebastian, explains to the actors how, facing a certain and gruesome death, the women chose to drown their children, preferring the trauma of murdering their own flesh and blood over experiencing the even greater trauma of watching their innocent children be mercilessly butchered by swords and teeth. In order to be faithful to the historical account, Sebastian informs the women actors, they should run into the river carrying their children, at which point filming would momentarily cease while the screaming children are replaced by dolls, and the women would then simulate the drowning of their actual children. 'Don't worry, nothing will happen to your children – they won't even get wet', Sebastian reassures the mothers, 'but we need you to do this because this is how it happened'. Unable to even conceive of taking such actions, let alone willing to 'act' them out for monetary gain, the indigenous cast members simply walk off the set, leaving unfinished a pivotal scene in Sebastian's steadily unravelling film.

### Potential pitfalls of cinematic representation

The popularity of cinema as a form of entertainment is often assumed to derive at least in part from its specifically visual form, or, put another way, from the power of the moving image to touch and influence viewers' minds in a manner unmatched by either the spoken or the written word. The visual element of a film's narrative 'goes well beyond what can be expressed in words' (Suber, 2006, p.xxix-xxx). This power imbues films with the capacity to represent particular types of situations or events – such as, with regard to development, poverty, conflict, or a specific context – much more immediately and empathetically. But the representational power of a film with regard to development issues also lies in the extent to which the audience has a prior knowledge of the contexts and events being depicted. Films that have explicitly sought to make developing contexts central to their content have only become popular in the West since the advent of mass tourism and travel. Although Western films set in the developing world go back a long way, prior to the 1990s these rarely made such contexts a central element, generally offering them as backdrops to a more universal story. Compare, for example, two Academy Award-winning films set in India: *Gandhi* (1984), which clearly focused on a particular individual's political trajectory but offered little of wider Indian society and context; and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009), which explicitly offered a grittier neo-realist depiction of contemporary Indian society.<sup>14</sup>

At least part of *Slumdog's* success was due to the reduction of global distance. Western audiences today are more familiar with Indian society than they were 25 years ago. From this perspective, we need to consider critically how films reflect specific development-related societal trends and issues. Indeed, one could even argue that it is misleading to view such popular films as authoritative

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<sup>14</sup>The extent to which *Slumdog Millionaire* is realistic is open to question (Sengupta 2010). Furthermore, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988) offered a much grittier depiction of urban deprivation to Western audiences a full two decades earlier.



repositories of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Two films that centre on urban violence in Latin America highlight this issue particularly well. The first is *City of God* (2002), a Brazilian film directed by Fernando Meirelles, which was a surprise global hit and garnered a number of critics' prizes, as well as four Oscar nominations in 2004. The second is *La Yuma* (2010), the first full-length feature film to emerge from Nicaragua in over 20 years. Directed by the Nicaragua-based Frenchwoman, Florence Jaugey, it has not been distributed as widely as *City of God*, but has been extensively lauded in the media and at independent film festivals all over the world, and was Nicaragua's submission for the 2011 Best Foreign Film Oscar.

*City of God* was one of the first films to bring the critical development issue of Brazilian urban violence into the Western mainstream, and has without doubt helped put the subject on the public agenda. Such is the power of the film that it is frequently shown in North American and European university settings as a quasi-documentary, despite the fact that it makes no claims to being a veridical depiction of Brazilian urban violence. As Armstrong (2009: 85) has pointed out, 'American and European reception of creative art from the developing world is usually framed by the assumption that it has a testimonial value and points to a collective condition'. A short excerpt was used (without forewarning) at an academic conference attended by one of us (Rodgers) in 2003 in order to introduce the general theme of the paper he was presenting on gang violence in Nicaragua.

The problem, however, is that the film is not a documentary. Although *City of God* draws on a semi-autobiographical novel of the same name published in 1997 by the Brazilian author Paulo Lins,<sup>16</sup> and its basic storyline plausibly depicts the evolution of organised gang violence in the *Cidade de Deus* suburb of Rio de Janeiro between the 1960s and the 1980s, the film is also riddled with stereotypes that both project and confirm certain critically flawed ideas about gangs and gang members, that have moreover long contributed to preventing sensible public action being taken to tackle gang violence all over the world.<sup>17</sup> For example, Little Zé, a central character who is presented as the driving force behind the growth of crime and violence in the *Cidade de Deus* suburb, comes across as a psychopath. This implicitly places the blame for his brutality on individual characteristics, rather than the structural circumstances that the overwhelming majority of gang research has repeatedly highlighted ever since Frederick Thrasher's (1927) ground-breaking study of gangs in Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> One could argue of course that the veracity of cinematic representation is not the point. The popularity of the medium may still serve to promote a concern for development issues more widely than is generally the case with academic or policy outputs, irrespective of whether the film is 'right' or 'wrong'. For example, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy reportedly led to a significant rise in revenue-generating tourism to New Zealand, where the films were shot, despite the fact that Middle Earth is a fictional location.

<sup>16</sup> Although Paulo Lins grew up in the *Cidade de Deus* suburb, his writing drew much more on his experiences as research assistant for Alba Zaluar, one of Brazil's foremost anthropologists (personal communication, 19 October 2009). It is also important to note that there are major differences between the book and the film.

<sup>17</sup> More generally, as Bülent Diken (2005: 311-12) points out, the film also represents the *favela* (slum) in a particular way, based on 'the logic of oppositional differences between normality and perversion, law and despotism, mind and body, reason and desire. Through a power-knowledge nexus, the ...*favela* is frozen in stereotypes. ... In other words, the *favela* is constituted as a fantasy space that both conditions and escapes the "social". Fantasies create objects of desire, but they create these objects as being out of reach'.

<sup>18</sup> In a related manner, the scene in the film where a street child is made to choose and kill one of his peers, an act that is depicted as presenting him with an extreme moral dilemma, may lack plausibility. Much

This issue starkly highlights the potential pitfalls associated with seeing films as authoritative representational forms. More so than any academic or policy text, the credibility of a film derives squarely from its narrative structure, and cinematographic imperatives being what they are, facts frequently have to give way to dramatic effect.<sup>19</sup> This is also evident, though in a different way, with regards to *La Yuma*. This film tells the story of a young girl struggling to escape a life of poverty in the *barrios* of Managua through boxing. It chronicles her relationships with family, the local street gang (to which she belongs), as well as with a middle-class journalism university student. Issues such as domestic violence, abuse, gangs, inequality, and class difference are all tackled in a way that offers an unusually realistic representation of the difficult nature of life in poor urban neighbourhoods, and part of the film's appeal clearly derives from its realism. At the same time, however, although much of what is depicted in *La Yuma* rings true, the overall effectiveness of the film is paradoxically based on significant simplifications of a complex reality, to the extent that they are actually extremely distorting.

Most blatantly, although the film is set at some point after 2006, it depicts gangs as they existed in the 1990s, ignoring the dramatic and messy consequences that the widespread emergence of crack cocaine in the early 2000s had in poor urban neighbourhoods in Nicaragua. Previously semi-ritualistic, vigilante-style gangs became more brutal and more predatory of their local communities as a result of both crack consumption and trafficking (see Rodgers, 2006); but depicting this would have no doubt confused the relatively straightforward overarching narrative of the film, which manages to remain appealing despite its dramatic subject matter by offering generally positive representations of unsavoury phenomena. Gang violence, for example, is portrayed almost comically, while depictions of other forms of everyday chronic brutality, such as domestic violence and abuse, are kept to a minimum, and generally implied rather than explicitly shown.

Similarly, inequality is tackled by bringing together the film's eponymous heroine with a university student from Nicaragua's very small – and not terribly significant, at least from a sociological point of view – middle class, rather than juxtaposing her life with that of an individual emanating from the country's shockingly venal elite (see Rodgers, 2008). As such, the film can be said to offer an incomplete and indeed rather particular consideration of what is perhaps the most fundamental dynamic of contemporary Nicaraguan society. Although critical of the yawning gap between rich and poor, in representational terms it arguably misses its target, as the film's central protagonists all tend to correspond to exceptional rather than archetypal characters within Nicaraguan society.

At the same time, Jaugey obviously plays hard and fast with the fabric of social reality in order to bend it to the needs of crafting a clear and deeply empathic fictional narrative, and succeeds very well in this respect, for the film's storyline is both engrossing and empathy-inducing. Its nature is, however, slightly off-putting for anybody who has a prior knowledge of Nicaragua – and more specifically of the country's poor urban neighbourhoods – due to the underlying distortions. Seen

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research on street children has highlighted how they are generally bound to other street children by rather weak and often very temporary ties that mean that they often betray each other with little thought or remorse (Herrera *et al.*, 2007; Wolseth, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Armstrong (2009: 92), for example, notes that *City of God* mixes an 'MTV style' with 'neo-realist technique', and that it is very much this eclectic cinematographic style that enables the film to live up to Frederic Jameson's (1992: 1) famous aphorism that 'the visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination'.

from this perspective, it is perhaps unfortunate that the film is being actively promoted by the French film association as a means through which schools can teach youth about Nicaragua and Central America, although admittedly in explicit contrast to more commercial films that involve highly sensationalistic depictions of Central American gangs, such as Cary Fukunaga's widely acclaimed *Sin Nombre* (2009), for example.<sup>20</sup>

The power of film as a particular representational genre is clearly a double-edged sword. There is no doubt that films can convey a visceral sense of a given situation or issue more vividly than any academic text or policy report. For example, David Wheatley's film *The March* (1990), a serious and ultimately tragic satire about famine, humanitarianism, and the West's relationship with the South, is a brilliant teaching tool to shock romantic students into realising that the primary imperatives guiding the development business are rarely idealistic. Although by no means a new point, it is one that is rarely discussed explicitly in academic – and even less policy – texts, and *The March* provides excellent dramatic insight onto the issue.<sup>21</sup> But this power is extremely seductive, and in the same way that the narrative sleights of anthropologists – 'I've been there and you haven't' – and the mathematical mystification of econometricians enable them to authoritatively bulldoze over underlying deficiencies in their academic texts, it means that cinematic representations of issues and situations are often not challenged, especially when films are popularly acclaimed.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, *The March* sometimes verges on caricature. Many of the details that it offers – such as those concerning the workings of European Union, for example – are plainly wrong, but have been clearly modified in order to tighten the narrative structure of the film. But then, as Mark Twain (in)famously put it, one should 'never let the facts get in the way of a good story'...

## Films as popular representations of development

This final section discusses some of the ways that film has both represented and shaped ideas about the development encounter in the popular realm. Film, we argue, like literature, has played a role in the ways that public understandings of development have been historically constructed. This is of course a very large subject, and we choose to approach it selectively through a short case study of a sub-genre of films within a moment of Western cinema during the first half of the 1980s. From the work of Edward Said (1978) on 'Orientalism' onwards, we have become aware of how the construction of the colonial 'Other' is inherently tied to the construction of notions of selfhood within the colonising 'Self'. This idea continues to resonate with those wishing to understand how Westerners encounter and view the rest of the world, and films can clearly help us to understand how the framing of North–South relationships has evolved and changed, reinforcing or attempting to challenge dominant ideas and stereotypes among their audiences. Smith and Yanacopulos (2004: 660), for example, argue that the 'public understanding of development' is a difficult area for

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<sup>20</sup> See [http://www.cinelangues.com/wp-content/uploads/Dossier\\_La%20yuma.pdf](http://www.cinelangues.com/wp-content/uploads/Dossier_La%20yuma.pdf) [accessed 10 June 2011].

<sup>21</sup> A more recent film that depicts the same general issue with regard to the war in Iraq is Armando Iannucci's black comedy, *In the Loop* (2009). Entertainingly, the central protagonist of this film is a (fictional) British Minister for International Development.

<sup>22</sup> This is an issue that is not just limited to film, but also applies more generally.

study precisely because development itself is a contested subject, and 'the fact that there are multiple public faces of development reflects a complex situation about which we have relatively little understanding'. Film, we would argue, is a useful place to start in order to see such complexity in action.

We find it significant that during the early 1980s, a crop of left-of-centre yet mainstream popular action thrillers started appearing in cinemas. These all shared a common but arguably new set of anxieties about the changing relationship between the West and the 'Third World', and took as their central narrative the idea of a Western citizen (normally a journalist) thrown into an unstable or threatening situation in the developing world.<sup>23</sup> Three notable examples of the genre include *Missing* (1982), set during the post-Pinochet coup period in Chile, *Under Fire* (1983), on the last days of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), which takes place during the failed 1965 communist coup attempt in Indonesia against Sukarno.<sup>24</sup> The central Western character – respectively played by Jack Lemmon, Nick Nolte and Mel Gibson – initially has little interest in the situation around him, but is slowly forced by events to engage more fully and even to take sides in the struggle for justice within the conflict encountered.

*Missing* (1982) was directed by the Greek film-maker Constantin Costa-Gavras, who shared a screenplay adaptation Oscar for the film, which was also awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival in 1982. Katz (1994: 295) describes the film as 'a piercing, factually-based drama about American-sanctioned political atrocities in post-Allende Chile'. *Under Fire* (1983) was directed by the Canadian film-maker Roger Spottiswoode, who began his cinematographic career as a film editor for Sam Peckinpah, the well-known director of classic Westerns such as *The Wild Bunch* (1971) and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973). The film tells the story of a US journalist who becomes drawn into helping the *Sandinista* revolutionaries in Nicaragua maintain their momentum for the final push of their struggle. He takes a bogus picture of their fallen leader that makes him appear to be alive, thus denying the government both a propaganda victory and its final consignment of US weapons. Finally, Australian director Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) follows an inexperienced Australian journalist called Guy Hamilton as he becomes caught up in the turbulent politics of Indonesia in 1965, and has his indifference to his surroundings challenged.

All three films enjoyed significant popular and critical acclaim. In general terms, they can be seen to form a sub-genre of 'Westerners lost and found in Third World conflicts'. People are caught up within the local realities of global conflicts and forced to reassess their attitudes and their place in the world. As Hettne (2009: 84) writes in his overview of development thinking, 'the 1970s was a

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<sup>23</sup> An alternative type of film about Western citizens in danger in the 'Third World' has emerged during the last decade, perhaps reflecting new anxieties about the exploitative relationships between the West and 'the Rest'. For example, the 2006 film *Turistas* (also known as *Paradise Lost*) portrays a group of Western tourists who are kidnapped in order to have their organs harvested. The physician who performs the operations explicitly frames his actions in developmental terms, explaining to his victims that 'rich gringos' exploit Brazil and have done so for years, but that by harvesting their organs and sending them to urban hospitals to give to poor Brazilians, 'it is time to give back'. *The Beach* (2000), directed by Danny Boyle, is another example.

<sup>24</sup> Other films in this mini-genre include Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (1981), about a disillusioned West German man in a barren marriage who goes to work as a war correspondent in Beirut, and Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), about a US journalist who leaves behind his problems to drive to El Salvador.

decade of crisis and rethinking, paving the way for significant discursive change. The shift to a new development discourse, which was centred on the concept of globalization, came around the year 1980'. Although the end of the Cold War was still some years away, the seeds of a new reality were becoming increasingly evident. Hettne in particular draws attention to a specific set of factors that contributed to the new development paradigm of 'globalism' at this time, including the rise of the New Right, a neoliberal 'counter revolution' in development economics, the collapse of communism, and the rise of post-modernism. All three of the films touch directly on these issues, and in doing so both reveal aspects of this period of change, whether in terms of national level transformation in relation to global economic and political interests, or the level of the personal, through the narratives of individual actors caught up in events.

In *Missing*, for example, Charlie, the idealistic 'anti-establishment' young American writer – naïve, but curious about the world about him – is living in Chile with his wife Beth. Travelling outside Santiago, Charlie is trapped by the coup, and the film retrospectively follows his efforts to get back safely through the maze of Chilean army checkpoints and encounters with dubious US undercover agents. We know that Charlie did not return, and is listed by the authorities as missing. Eye-witnesses report that he was arrested by the military, but the US embassy denies any knowledge of this and insists that he is more likely to be in hiding, since he had supposedly been associating with radical students. The film then traces the efforts of Beth and Ed Horman, Charlie's businessman father, who flies to Chile to uncover what actually happened. The setting of post-Allende Chile is an environment that first challenges, then traumatises and eventually transforms, Ed Horman. He begins the film as a conservative Christian Scientist with complete faith in the integrity of the US government, but his worldview is shaken when he finds out the truth about the extra-judicial killing of his 'disappeared' son during the recent US-backed coup. The film exposes US involvement in the coup in support of companies operating in Chile's markets, and Ed Horman's narrative arc depicts the questioning by ordinary citizens of what is being done in their name in the Third World. Ed initially refuses to see the evidence of US complicity in the terrible events that have just taken place in Chile, but is eventually persuaded by the weight of evidence that Beth shows him, by the callous double-speak of officials who claim to be trying to help him, and eventually by the hundreds of bodies that he sees in the local morgue. At the end of the film, when Ed confronts the US Ambassador he is told: 'If you hadn't been personally involved in this... unfortunate incident, you would be sitting at home complacent and more or less oblivious to all this'.

*Missing* makes the personal political, but the neoliberal ravages of Thatcherism and Reaganism during the 1980s –part of the ideological foundations for which had been laid in Chile under the authoritarian Pinochet regime – highlight how such a distinction is ultimately spurious. Certainly, this is one of the messages contained in *Under Fire*, which explicitly shows how individual personal experience comes together with wider global issues. In this film, the central character, photographer Russell Price, has flitted from war zone to war zone until he finds himself taking pictures in Nicaragua just before the 1979 *Sandinista* revolution. Events, however, lead him to abandon his position of cynical detachment when he is forced to take sides, after witnessing what he eventually comes to see as a collision between heroic local struggles and malign global forces. The opening scene of the film takes place in Chad, where Price bumps into an American mercenary, Oates, who is used to changing sides regularly in local conflicts, and often does not even know if he is with the government or the rebels. The narrative then moves to Nicaragua, the

next global trouble spot, where we meet boozy pressman Alex and his journalist wife Claire, who are separating. When Russell is later taken to meet renowned guerrilla leader Rafael, Claire pointedly tells him that 'the world is not divided into East and West any more, it is divided into North and South'.

On the one hand, the Cold War period is spelled out through the idea of journalists and mercenaries moving from one war zone to another, indifferent either to the human suffering or the politics in which they are implicated. On the other hand, however, the film depicts a changing world order, in which the power play between East and West is becoming characterised by growing tensions between rich and poor areas of the world, a new geopolitical turning point. Its vision is intimately tied up in the individual personal epiphanies of the Western bystander characters in the film, but the film also reveals the indifference of global American power to poverty and social justice. When towards the end of the film Claire sees her husband Alex's filmed death at the hands of the military on a television screen at a hospital for a second time, she looks away in pain. A Nicaraguan medical staff person tells her: '50,000 Nicaraguans have died; now perhaps Americans will be outraged by what is happening here. Perhaps we should have killed an American journalist 50 years ago'.<sup>25</sup>

The film also brings a strongly cinematic view of development, because it attempts consciously to be a film about 'seeing', and tries to 'sync' the visual medium of film with some of its ideas. The power of the visual/representation is revealed through the main character, a photographer, whose pictures are central to both the storytelling and the structure of the film, and issues of representation are framed in moral and political terms. Russell says at one point to a radical Nicaraguan priest he meets in a police cell, 'I don't take sides, I take pictures', and is told by the priest to 'go home' if he can't do more. The film also relies on the power of Russell's photographs for much of its impact. We are often shown significant events through the roving, obsessive lens of his camera, with the action suddenly frozen in a still that turns from colour into black and white. This stylistic freeze-frame technique recurs throughout the film, forcing us (and the characters) to look more closely at the details of poverty, injustice and violence, and perhaps at the same time revealing (and challenging?) the implicit exploitation within our gaze.<sup>26</sup> Here, the potential for connecting the study of development films more tightly with film theory, and what Narine (2010: 120) describes as 'cinematic looking relations', becomes particularly apparent. The key themes of power, seeing and representation are in fact given centre stage in the central dramatic turning point in the film, where during the *Sandinistas'* final push Russell is asked to take sides and stage a photograph that makes the recently-killed rebel leader appear to still be living, to prevent new US

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<sup>25</sup> The broader point being made here relates to the relationship between authority and one's position within development contexts writ large. The value of being a white Westerner is presented as offering a comparative advantage in drawing attention to a specific issue. It is interesting, however, to note that more recent films, such as *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), make a similar point somewhat differently. The film ends with a Ugandan doctor sacrificing himself to save a Scottish doctor's life so that the Scottish doctor can tell the world about the brutality of the Idi Amin regime, explicitly saying that because he is white, people will listen and they will believe him.

<sup>26</sup> Such themes are of course reflective of the post-modern concerns with representational issues that were beginning to gain influence within anthropology, development studies and other fields of the social sciences during the 1980s.

arms shipments to Somoza's regime. As a *guerrillero* puts it, 'you're a great photographer, make him alive'.

*The Year of Living Dangerously* similarly engages with relationships between the First and the Third Worlds. An important contrast with the other two films, however, is the different narrative point of view, insofar as the story of *The Year of Living Dangerously* is mainly told from the point of view of Billy Kwon, a Chinese-Australian photographer who has formed close relationships with local people and is highly sensitive to events going on all around. As in *Under Fire*, Western ways of seeing are both problematised and politicised within the film's narrative. We see Kwan's photographs being developed in the dark-room, and they help to reveal the human and political stories of poverty and underdevelopment that are lost on the other Westerners.<sup>27</sup> He adopts and tries to educate Hamilton, feeding him contacts and telling him 'you have got to listen harder'. Hamilton becomes more sensitive to his surroundings, meets and falls in love with Gill who works at the British Embassy, and he begins filing hard-hitting news stories about what is going on, including a passionate report on the Lombok famine.

The film's main narrative turning point occurs when Hamilton is presented with an ethical challenge in the form of information that an arms shipment from China has arrived that will make a Communist uprising possible, but unlike Russell in *Under Fire*, he fails the test. He decides to turn the information into a good story that will further his career, but instead of remaining discreet, as his source had requested, he asks questions and puts others in danger. For Billy, this is nothing less than a betrayal, and he rebukes him: 'You have abused your position as a journalist ... I made you see things; I made you feel something about what you write'. Hamilton's inability to fully alter his worldview, beyond a superficial concern that serves his career, can be read as a metaphor for the indifference and collusion of the West in Third World poverty. One way this is expressed is through Hamilton's relationship with his loyal driver and Communist sympathiser Kumar, whose life becomes threatened after the ensuing PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) uprising fails. 'Tell me', Kumar asks him, 'Am I a stupid man? ... Why should I live like a poor man my whole life when stupid people in your country live well?' When Hamilton says that this is a 'good question', but that he has no answer, Kumar replies, 'So why do you condemn those in my country who try to do something about it? ... Mister Billy Kwon was right. Westerners do not have answers any more'. The world, and the West's position within it, has changed within a shifting global order, but only a few are yet able to see it.<sup>28</sup>

These films both reflected but also arguably contributed to shaping several important strands of changing development thinking during the 1980s. The onset of globalisation, in which the distance between individual Western lives and the 'masses' of the developing world suddenly seemed to become shorter, is clearly reflected in all three, for example. The complacency of Western citizens

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<sup>27</sup> The role of the figure of 'the photographer', who recurs in *City of God*, *Under Fire* and this film, is a central device in development films that requires a more detailed analysis than can be provided here. It brings an apparently neutral gaze that enhances the proximity of the viewer. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for this point.

<sup>28</sup> To underscore the idea of 'seeing' that runs through the whole movie, in the final section of the film Hamilton's retina in one eye becomes detached after a violent encounter with a soldier. He is told to rest if he wants to keep his eye, but Hamilton decides to risk losing it by rushing to the airport in order to escape Indonesia and travel with Gill to London, her new posting.

to poverty and oppression is highlighted.<sup>29</sup> *Missing* and *Under Fire* explicitly question Cold War assumptions about the West propping up authoritarian regimes irrespective of the human consequences of this policy, and arguably herald the re-birth of an ethically and human rights-driven approach to development (see Little, 2003), in stark contrast to the technocratic vision that predominated during the 1960s and 1970s (as illustrated in *The Fog of War*). Another issue that emerges clearly from all three films is the growing distrust of the state and, in particular, of what the Western state tells its citizens about the wider world – a critical view of the state which was already beginning to feed into the new neoliberal orthodoxy. It is difficult to separate cause and effect here, of course, but the popularity of this particular genre suggests that it captured something of an epochal *zeitgeist*, both reflecting and most likely influencing people's hopes, fears and assumptions. Although *The Year of Living Dangerously* is set in the 1960s, and *Missing* in the 1970s, the concerns of these films are fully those of the mid-1980s.

## Conclusion

In this article we have tried to open up a range of themes within the 'projection of development', in order to promote further engagement with the idea of film as an important but as yet under-studied medium for development knowledge. We began our exploration with a discussion of the nature of film as a representational medium for development concerns, and noted the ways that a number of films have explored key themes within the landscape of global inequalities and power relationships. For example, films have shown a particular capacity for exploring a range of disjunctures<sup>30</sup> between policymakers and the impact of their decisions upon people, the neglect of history and context by decision-makers doomed to repeat their mistakes, and the dynamics and morality of market exchange between rich and poor groups. And as *Even the Rain* shows us, we can even draw a potentially useful analogy between the production of a film and a development intervention. It is no accident that a film is normally described as a 'project', and is a venture that requires the top-down directed organisation of a mixed group of insiders and outsiders into meaningful action and outcomes. When they were asked to act out scenes that they found objectionable, the indigenous cast members simply walked off the set, just as community members may exit development projects which fail to meet their needs and resist policy decisions over which they have little say. There is therefore a fairly straightforward argument that can be made concerning the power of films as additional and legitimate forms of development knowledge, both because film is a popular medium, and because films are documents with a capacity for dealing with certain types of complexity and offering distinctive insights.

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<sup>29</sup> These films perhaps prefigure what Narine (2010: 120) analyses as the way Western film viewers are made to feel implicated in 'the promulgation of the global traumas our leaders have been impotent to prevent'.

<sup>30</sup> See Lewis and Mosse (2006) for a discussion of 'order and disjuncture' in development.



Yet there are also potential pitfalls and limitations that are apparent within this brief review. As both *La Yuma* and *The March* show us, powerful visual storytelling all too easily comes at the cost of factual detail and historical accuracy, raising the question of whether the gains made by the medium of film within one area of the representation of development knowledge may all too easily become weakened or even invalidated by the losses within another. There is also a constant and often unhealthy tension, between the emphasis on individual actors and their moral and political dilemmas and the wider structural and societal factors, that conditions the social settings in which these stories are told. And while films that focus on Westerners engaging with their own consciences, dilemmas and contradictory feelings towards global conflict and inequality doubtless provide instructive insights that can feed usefully into public understanding of development issues and may even (at best) contribute to awareness raising and even politicisation, there is often a high cost paid in terms of the relative lack of local voices.

In short, many of the films we have discussed here raise important problems that will need further elaboration than the brief treatment we have been able to provide: including the over-reliance on particular narrative imperatives, the seductiveness of film as a medium, the personalising of politics, the selectivity of issues that are focused upon, the inability to address structural complexity, and the tendency for trivialisation of serious issues within star actor vehicles. Despite this double-edged sword, the way cinema plays a role in shaping and reflecting popular perceptions of global development issues in the West cannot easily be ignored. Films set at particular historical junctures such as *La Yuma* may, as we have seen, display jarring anachronisms, but the film itself is of its time and speaks to its own present. *The Year of Living Dangerously* says as much about the growing awareness of a moment of globalisation in the 1980s as it does about Sukarno's Indonesia in 1965.

As we attempted in our earlier paper in relation to the development novel, we have tried to argue in this paper that there are important opportunities for a closer engagement with film as a medium for discussing the ideas and processes of development. If it sometimes feels that the boundaries of acceptable development knowledge are being significantly narrowed by the current emphasis on quantification (e.g., the formal measurement of 'impact', 'effectiveness' and 'results', the heightened attention to randomised controlled trials), it is instructive to recognise the value of films as an archive of popular ideas about the vicissitudes of development, as reflections of the prevailing societal *zeitgeist*, and last but not least, as powerful teaching tools for bringing alive and humanising important, if inherently vexed, global issues.

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## **Annex: Suggested films on development issues**

The following list represents a personal and idiosyncratic selection of films that we hope will constitute a starting point rather than an endpoint for anybody interested in the exploring the cinematographic representation of development. With the exception of a couple discussed in this article, we have limited ourselves to English-language films.

- Apocalypto (2006)
- Avatar (2009)
- Bamako (2006)
- Beyond Borders (2003)
- Black Robe (1991)
- Blood Diamond (2006)
- Cannibal Tours (1989)
- Casino Royale (2006)
- Circle of Deceit (1981)
- City of God (2002)
- Critical Assignment (The Guinness film, 2003)
- Dirty Pretty Things (2002)
- Entre Nos (2009)
- Even the Rain (También la lluvia) (2010)
- Gandhi (1984)
- Gangs of New York (2002)
- Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalema (2008)
- Hotel Rwanda (2004)
- In the Loop (2009)
- Johnny Mad Dog (2008)
- Journey To Banana Land (1950)
- Jungle Drums of Africa (1953)
- La Yuma (2010)
- Men with Guns (1997)
- Missing (1982)
- Salaam Bombay (1988)
- Salmon Fishing in Yemen (2011)
- Salvador (1983)
- Sin Nombre (2009)
- Slumdog Millionaire (2009)
- Tears of the Sun (2003)
- The Beach (2000)
- The Constant Gardener (2005)
- The Day after Tomorrow (2004)
- The Fog of War (2003)
- The Gods Must be Crazy (1981)

- The Hurt Locker (2008)
- The Killing Fields (1984)
- The Last King of Scotland (2006)
- The March (1990)
- The Mission (1986)
- The Motorcycle Diaries (2004)
- The Painted Veil (2006)
- The Year of Living Dangerously (1982)
- Tsotsi (2005)
- Turistas (2006)
- Under Fire (1983)
- Viva Zapata (1952)
- Volunteers (1985)
- White Material (2009)

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