

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Propaganda Spectacles: Alan Fisher's Photography and the US Information Service in Brazil during the Early Cold War

Daniel Mandur Thomaz

King's College London, UK

Email: daniel.mandur_thomaz@kcl.ac.uk

(Received 5 November 2024; revised 7 August 2025; accepted 19 August 2025)

Abstract

This article analyses samples of unexplored photographic series produced by US photographer Alan Fisher (1913–88) in Brazil between 1950 and 1953. These images are part of visual reports produced for the United States Information Service (USIS) documenting the screening of newsreels, short films and cartoons in factories and rural communities in Brazil. The article repositions Fisher as a key figure for understanding US information warfare in mid-century Brazil. It theorises these screenings as political-performative events and develops an approach that accounts for the persuasive (and deceptive) dimension of these campaigns while acknowledging the audience's agency and strategic complicity.

Keywords: US Information Service; Brazil; Cold War; transnational propaganda; photography; film; information warfare; Alan Fisher; US–Brazil relations

This article will analyse samples of three photographic series produced by US photographer Alan Fisher (1913–88) in Brazil between 1950 and 1953. The photographs have been kept in Fisher's private collection and have not yet been the focus of any study.¹ They form part of visual reports produced by Fisher for the United States Information Service (USIS) and document the screening of USIS propaganda newsreels, short films and cartoons in factories and rural communities in Brazil (see Supplementary Material).² These screenings were held in the context of the Truman Doctrine of

¹ All photographs in this article were kindly made available by the Alan Fisher Archive (AFA), Ventura, CA, a private collection administered by Fisher's heirs. A project to curate, digitise and make available to the public Fisher's images of Brazil is being developed in a collaboration between King's College London (KCL), Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV-CPDOC, Brazil) and the AFA, with funding from the KCL–Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account. See: <https://propagandaspectacle.kcl.ac.uk/> (URLs last accessed 27 Jan. 2026).

² Propaganda is a form of organised persuasive communication usually characterised by the use of deception, although strategies such as incentivisation, coercion and deceptive coercion can also be present.



Communist containment and were meant to entertain, frame world affairs from a US (and Western) perspective, and 'educate' the audience on a variety of issues – from basic sanitation and agricultural techniques to the dangers of spreading rumours and disinformation.

This article has two aims. The first is to position Fisher as a key figure for understanding US information warfare in mid-century Brazil. The second is to explore the extraordinary potential of Fisher's photography for formulating an approach to these propaganda operations that accounts for the persuasive (and deceptive) dimension of these screenings while also acknowledging the audience's agency and strategic complicity. The film screenings photographed by Alan Fisher constitute spectacles marked by performances of US modernity, global power and leadership in a range of different activities: from geopolitics to agriculture, from micro-economics to the championing of political and moral values.

I structure my argument in three stages. First, I theorise the screenings framed by Fisher as political-performative events (propaganda spectacles) and argue that the role of entertainment and performance in these campaigns is crucial to an appreciation of the audience's willingness to attend these spectacles. Secondly, I analyse Fisher's images as a new addition to the body of primary sources about US propaganda operations in Brazil during the early Cold War and argue that, as such, these photos reveal campaigns with a level of detail that has not yet been fully appreciated in the historiography on USIS in Brazil. Finally, I discuss Fisher's role in framing these screenings (and the audience's gaze). It is important to highlight that the photos analysed here were not meant to be used as propaganda material: they were part of a bureaucratic USIS endeavour to document and report its activities to the central office within the State Department; in this sense they are feeding back to the US information apparatus and, ultimately, working as a technology of US informal empire.³ Ultimately, Fisher's images can help

See Vian Bakir *et al.*, 'Organized Persuasive Communication: A New Conceptual Framework for Research on Public Relations, Propaganda and Promotional Culture', *Critical Sociology*, 45: 3 (2019), pp. 311–28. The field of propaganda studies, and this article, are heavily indebted to the work of French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912–94) and his conceptualisation of the term. See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage, 1973). On the impact of Ellul's work on the field, and on contemporary debates about methodologies in propaganda studies, see, for example, Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (London: SAGE, 2012); Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy and Nancy Snow (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda* (London: SAGE, 2020).

³I am working with the notion of 'informal empire' to characterise the network of political, economic and cultural practices that characterised US influence over Latin America during the Cold War. For a debate about the genealogy (and the limits) of the concept, see, for example, Bernard Attard, 'Informal Empire: The Origin and Significance of a Key Term', *Modern Intellectual History*, 20: 4 (2023), pp. 1219–50; Hideki Kan, 'Informal Empire and the Cold War', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 49: 3 (2021), pp. 576–606; and Gregory A. Barton, *Informal Empire and the Rise of One World Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Ricardo Salvatore argues that theories of imperialism and dependency have neglected 'other types of interventions (scientific, reformist, religious, literary, etc.)', a point that, as I argue in this article, is still relevant to the case of US–Brazil relations in the early Cold War. See Ricardo Salvatore, 'The Enterprise of Knowledge: Representational Machines of Informal Empire', in Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. Legrand and Ricardo D. Salvatore (eds.), *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of US–Latin American Relations* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 70.

us to gain an insight into these propaganda operations: they frame these events in a way that offers a third-party perspective into the phenomenon. In this sense, the triangulation between the audience, the screening of propaganda films and the framing of these events by the photographer will be used as a strategy to think about the blurred boundaries between the audience's agency, propaganda's subterfuge and the imperial gaze.

Fisher in Brazil: from the OCIAA to the US Information Agency

Alan Fisher (1913–88) started his career as a photojournalist in 1934, working for *The New York World Telegram*, and later for the newspaper *PM*. He was commissioned in 1942 by a former editor of *PM*, Alexander Murphy, to work for the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) documenting the cooperation between Brazil and the United States, and the war effort in Latin America.⁴ The OCIAA took a leading role in developing campaigns mixing entertainment and propaganda, and its operations inspired initiatives by the US Office of War Information (OWI) in other areas of the globe. The OCIAA developed collaborations with US museums and cultural institutions (such as New York's Museum of Modern Art) and cooperated with State Department initiatives to promote tours and cultural exchange between visual artists, musicians and intellectuals from the United States and Latin America.⁵ It had a radio broadcasting division of its own, which by 1943 was disseminating news to 92 Brazilian stations and became a model for the Voice of America (VOA), created in 1942. The Office subsidised newspapers and fed the press with pro-US material, and had a well-developed film division, which in collaboration with US studios produced films, newsreels and cartoons to support the war effort. It hired several Hollywood stars, including Orson Welles in 1941 and Walt Disney in 1942, to direct, produce and act in films about Latin America aimed at both flattering the region and increasing domestic understanding of Latin American culture in the United States.⁶ To conduct these operations and liaise with local and international collaborators, the OCIAA established local information service offices operating from US embassies and consulates-general. Among other things, USIS offices in Brazil during and after the war created and managed libraries and binational cultural centres (Centro Cultural Brasil–Estados Unidos – Brazil–US Cultural Center) in different cities (such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Belo

⁴The OCIAA was created in 1940 as the Office of the Coordinator of Commercial and Cultural Affairs between American Republics by Roosevelt's administration – with Nelson Rockefeller as its head – to counter Nazi-fascist propaganda on the continent and to coordinate public and private investments in different areas of cooperation and hemispheric defence. The office was renamed in 1941 (becoming OCIAA), and again in 1945 (becoming the Office of Inter-American Affairs – OIAA), when it was absorbed by the State Department. The OIAA was abolished in 1946 and its function completely integrated into the State Department.

⁵See Fernando Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency e sua ação no Brasil de 1953 a 1964', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade do Estado de São Paulo, 2015, p. 39; and Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 19.

⁶See Antonio Pedro Tota, *O imperialismo sedutor: A americanização do Brasil na época da Segunda Guerra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2000); and *The Seduction of Brazil: The Americanization of Brazil during World War II*, trans. Lorena B. Ellis (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009).

Horizonte, Belém, Salvador, Recife, Curitiba and Porto Alegre) to disseminate pro-US publications, stimulate English language learning and facilitate cultural exchange.

In Brazil, Fisher photographed 'the war effort, industry, prominent people, politicians, and so forth'.⁷ His main task, initially, was to feed the US press, and public opinion, with information about the United States' newest ally in South America: Brazil had declared war against the Axis powers in August 1942.⁸ Fisher spent three months in Chile in 1943, covering the Chilean government's break in relations with the Axis, and later travelled around Latin America covering the visit of the US Vice President Henry A. Wallace. He also contributed to the OCIAA publication *Em Guarda/En Guardia* (in its Portuguese- and Spanish-language versions). This was a magazine that used high-quality printing and photography to publish US war propaganda in Latin America, emulating the design of the weekly magazine *LIFE*.⁹

In 1944, he was sent to Europe to photograph the activities of Brazilian troops and their cooperation with the US effort on the Italian front. The OCIAA cooperated closely with the Brazilian government (the authoritarian Estado Novo, or 'New State', ruled by populist oligarch Getúlio Vargas) and its Departamento de Imprensa e Propaganda (Department of Press and Propaganda, DIP). On his return to Brazil in 1945, Fisher inaugurated an exhibition with his photos of the Força Expedicionária Brasileira (Brazilian Expeditionary Force) in training and in action on the Italian front; he also received a medal of honour awarded by the Brazilian government to war correspondents.¹⁰ In addition to its media and cultural divisions, the OCIAA also oversaw public health and sanitation initiatives. To document one of these initiatives, Fisher travelled across the Amazon region, photographing the collaboration between the OCIAA and Brazil through a focus on the Serviço Especial de Saúde Pública (Special Public Health Service, SESP). His mission was to produce positive images of Brazil to feed the OCIAA reports and to be disseminated by the Office to the US press. These photos emphasise the role of the SESP (and of the OCIAA) in modernising Brazilian public health and documenting new medical facilities in the Amazon region, the distribution of anti-malaria medicine, and the medical treatment of workers involved in the production of rubber, a key commodity for the war effort.¹¹

By the end of the Second World War, the agencies involved in psychological and information warfare were operating in divisions inside the State Department, the

⁷ G. Lewis Schmidt, 'Interview with Alan Fisher' (transcript, 1988), www.loc.gov/item/mfdipbib000375/.

⁸ Fisher was part of a Good Neighbor Policy photographic mission to Brazil that included two other US photographers, 'Genevieve Naylor (1915–89) and G. E. Kidder Smith (1913–97); all three were commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller's OCIAA. However, unlike Naylor and Kidder Smith, Fisher stayed for much longer, developing deeper ties with the country. Despite this, he is the least well known of the group. See Ana Maria Mauad, 'Fotografia e a cultura política nos tempos da política da Boa Vizinhança', *Anais do Museu Paulista*, 22: 1 (2014), pp. 133–59.

⁹ See Carlos de Souza, 'Para la defensa de las Américas: The Pictorial Magazine *En Guardia* in Nelson A. Rockefeller's Propaganda Campaign for Latin America during World War II', Rockefeller Archive Center Online (November 2012): https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=art_fac.

¹⁰ Rômulo de Paula Andrade, 'Saúde, educação e Amazônia na política da Boa Vizinhança: A trajetória de Alan Fisher no Brasil (1942–1945)', *Revista de História*, 178: 1 (2019), p. 9.

¹¹ The 51 photos taken by Fisher documenting the work of SESP are part of the Capanema collection at the FGV CPDOC Archives, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The images are also at the AFA in Ventura, CA.

OCIAA and the OWI, with activities involving intelligence and black propaganda (particularly on the European front) complemented by the Office of Strategic Services. Fisher served in Brazil continuously until 1955, mainly working for the USIS motion-picture division. In 1955, Fisher spent three months as a Public Affairs Officer in Lima, Peru, under the leadership of US Ambassador Ellis O. Briggs – who would become US Ambassador in Brazil between 1956 and 1959. In Brazil, and in Latin America, Fisher became an experienced propagandist and developed powerful connections within the US State Department and (after 1953) within the United States Information Agency (USIA), which paved the way for his appointment as Cultural Affairs Officer and Vice-Consul in the US consulate-general in São Paulo between 1966 and 1972, after working for the USIA in France and Vietnam.¹²

Like many US photographers of his generation, Fisher was deeply influenced by the blooming of photojournalism in the interwar period. As a result of developments in printing technology after the First World War, the presence, and prominence, of photographic images in newspapers and magazines became notorious. Weekly magazines and newspapers centring around photojournalism became a phenomenon in 1920s Germany, and the model rapidly reached the United Kingdom and the United States.¹³ In the United States, the establishment of weekly magazine *LIFE* (1936), and its emphasis on photography and premium printing quality, became a turning point. These publications used photography not simply to illustrate text, but as a key medium for information, decentring written language and making writers secondary in these publications.¹⁴ In Brazil, the format became established with the weekly magazine *O Cruzeiro* in the 1940s.¹⁵

Another key element shaping Fisher's photographic gaze (and that of his generation) is the impact of social documentary photography, or *concerned photography*, a term used by Cornell Capa (1918–2008) to refer to photographers committed to drawing

¹²In São Paulo, in the 1960s and 1970s, Fisher created a complex network of connections with local and international authorities, journalists, intellectuals and artists such as the modernist painter Flávio de Carvalho, comedian Manuel de Nobrega and US publisher Alfred Knopf. He also promoted the singing career of his wife, Florence Fisher. Alan Fisher became a collector of Brazilian popular art, which he exhibited in a gallery created inside the US consulate-general in São Paulo. His personal correspondence and a series of newspaper clippings about his activities as US Cultural Affairs Officer and Vice-Consul are held at the AFA. For the relationship between Fisher and Alfred Knopf, see Elizabeth Cancelli, *O diário de um Norte-Americano na ditadura: Alfred Knopf no Brasil, 27 de junho a 31 de agosto de 1969* (São Paulo: Intermeios, 2020) (bilingual edition).

¹³Mauricio Lissovsky argues that Stefan Lorant (1901–97) played a prominent role in the diffusion of the format. Escaping from Nazi Germany in 1933 and settling in the UK in 1934, Lorant – who had been the editor of the prestigious pictorial newspaper *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* – became involved in the creation of key pictorial magazines in Britain, such as the *Weekly Illustrated* (1934) and the *Picture Post* (1938). These models influenced *LIFE* (1936). Mauricio Lissovsky, 'Brasil, Refúgio do Olhar: Trajetória de um fotógrafo exilado no Rio de Janeiro dos anos 1940', *Revista Brasileira de História da Mídia*, 2: 2 (2013), p. 32.

¹⁴John Tagg suggests that in *LIFE* it was usual for the writers to carry the photographer's handbag and equipment. In the case of Margaret Bourke-White (1904–71), then the most celebrated photojournalist working for *LIFE*, the writer assigned to accompany her would also be expected to wash her clothes. See John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 108.

¹⁵See Nadja Peregrino, *O Cruzeiro: A revolução da fotorreportagem* (Rio de Janeiro: Dazibao, 1991).

public attention to social issues.¹⁶ The 1930s were marked by a wave of photographic reports commissioned by US states documenting the dramatic impact of the Great Depression of 1929 on society and of Roosevelt's New Deal programmes in tackling poverty and hunger among rural workers via the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Influential photographers commissioned by the FSA included Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Park, whose images became iconic representations of the New Deal.

Fisher's work as a photographer for the OCIAA during WW2, and for the US State Department afterwards, demanded that he frame Brazil as an underdeveloped but fast-modernising nation – a country that would benefit from alignment and cooperation with US interests – and as a strategic catalyst for US geopolitical influence in South America. Nevertheless, Fisher was also operating in a context marked by constant attempts by the Brazilian authorities to influence and shape the image of Brazil that would be captured and disseminated in the United States. As we will see, Brazilian workers (and their children), both in urban and rural areas, were at the other end of these information operations and experienced these campaigns as rare opportunities for entertainment and temporary relief from their grinding working conditions.

Fisher played a significant role in Brazil–US relations during WW2 and the Cold War. His trajectory as a talented photojournalist who was turned into an information agent, and then a Foreign Service officer, sheds new light on the development of the US propaganda apparatus in Brazil. In this sense, the dearth of scholarship on Alan Fisher is surprising.¹⁷ Studies on US propaganda, public diplomacy and information warfare targeting Brazil usually focus on policies and treat propaganda material as illustrative.¹⁸ As someone documenting (and later implementing) strategic information policies *in situ*, Fisher's images give us the opportunity to reverse the usual lens and look at these campaigns from a different angle, contributing to a new social and cultural history of US propaganda in Brazil.

The United States, Brazil and Early Cold War Information Warfare

Fisher's trajectory was deeply marked by the institutional and political changes that configured US–Brazil relations in the mid-twentieth century. The post-war period was characterised by a long series of institutional reforms meant to tackle the relative lack of centralised coordination of the different US agencies involved in

¹⁶See Mauad, 'Fotografia e a cultura política', p. 138; Andrade, 'Saúde, educação e Amazônia', p. 4; Nadya Bair, 'The International Origins of "Concerned Photography": Cornell Capa in the United States, Japan, and Israel', *American Art*, 36: 2 (2022), pp. 74–101.

¹⁷An exception, and the only study of Fisher's photography to date, is Rômulo de Paula Andrade's article (in Portuguese) about Fisher's work documenting SESP initiatives on public health in Amazon in 1945. See Andrade, 'Saúde, educação e Amazônia'.

¹⁸For example, see Gerald K. Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil: A Study of US Cold War Diplomacy in the Third World, 1945–1954* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1989); Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency'; and Josiane Aparecida Mozer, 'A arquitetura da dominação: O programa editorial da Agência de Informação dos Estados Unidos no Brasil (1953–1968)', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2020.

international information campaigns. Initiatives towards the unification of the information services around a more coherent agenda took place in the final years of the Truman administration (1945–53) with, for example, the creation of the US International Information and Educational Exchange Program (USIE), the institution that became responsible for coordinating the local USIS offices around the world.¹⁹ The last year of Truman's administration (1952) was marked by a 'belated effort to respond to the mounting pressure to remove U.S. information from the State Department and into its own agency'.²⁰ This was done through the creation of the semi-autonomous US International Information Administration (IIA). The effort of the Truman administration to reorganise the information apparatus was met with reluctance in the Congress and fierce criticism from Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, who constantly accused the information services of being infiltrated by Communism.²¹ Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and despite the criticism and the changes in policy and institutional structure, the local USIS became the face of US public diplomacy, and information warfare, in cities across different nations. It was at the USIS office based at the US embassy in Rio de Janeiro that Fisher would operate during this period.

Truman's containment doctrine was received by Brazilian president Eurico Gaspar Dutra's administration (1946–51) with open arms. The Brazilian government had made the Communist Party illegal in 1947, impeaching 14 MPs and a Senator elected in 1945. Although the closure of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (Brazilian Communist Party, PCB) was mainly the result of internal pressures – including a series of clashes between the government and unions – the impact of increased tensions between the United States and the USSR should not be overlooked.²²

The alleged 'special relationship' between Brazil and the United States established during WW2 (in great part shaped by the United States' 'Good Neighbor' policies towards Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s and pro-US propaganda disseminated

¹⁹ Another key initiative was the creation of the Psychological Strategy Board in July 1951, in an attempt to coordinate action by the State Department, the Department of Defense and the CIA.

²⁰ Cull, *The Cold War*, p. 23.

²¹ Even the deputy director of the IIA, Reed Harris, was denounced as subversive for his participation in student movements in the 1920s and 1930s. The new environment created by McCarthyism impacted USIS activities in Brazil directly, with a series of books by Brazilian authors being removed from USIS libraries for suspected Communist sympathies. See Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 73; and Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil*, p. 167.

²² Gianfranco Caterina's assessment of Brazil–USSR relations during Dutra's government is of particular interest here; the author argues that domestic anti-communism and tensions with labour movements were the determinant factors in the closure of the PCB, although a series of diplomatic incidents paved the way for the breakdown of relations between Brazil and the USSR in 1947. As noted by Mario Ângelo Brandão de Oliveira Miranda, the closure of the PCB has parallels with the closure of the Communist Party in Chile, also in 1947. See Gianfranco Caterina, 'Um grande oceano: Brasil e União Soviética atravessando a Guerra Fria (1947–1985)', unpubl. PhD diss., Escola de Ciências Sociais – FGV CPDOC, 2019; Mario Ângelo Brandão de Oliveira Miranda, "'Em defesa da democracia": O debate em torno do processo de proscrição do Partido Comunista do Brasil (1947–1948) e do Partido Comunista do Chile (1947–1948) sob uma perspectiva comparada', XXVIII Simpósio Nacional de História, Florianópolis, 2015; and José Antonio Segatto, 'PCB: A questão nacional e a democracia', in Jorge Ferreira and Lucília de Almeida Neves Delgado (eds.), *O Brasil Republicano: O tempo da experiência democrática*, vol. 3: *Da democratização de 1945 ao golpe civil-militar de 1964: Terceira República (1945–1964)* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2003), pp. 245–68.

by the OCIAA) led sectors of the Brazilian government to expect more financial aid and military cooperation from the United States than the country was willing to offer in the post-war period. In any case, this expectation (proven to be a fantasy) led Brazil to adopt a position that historian Gerson Moura termed 'unrewarded alignment' and economic historian Pedro Paulo Zahluth Bastos refers to as 'submissive alignment'.²³ This does not mean that Brazil's alignment was absolute and unrestricted. Recent scholarship has provided more nuance on Brazil's regional foreign policy, which included negotiations to sell weapons to the Dominican Republic despite US and British embargoes, as Trujillo's regime was viewed sympathetically by the most ardent anti-Communist sectors of Dutra's government.²⁴ It is also important to remember that Brazil refused to send troops to the Korean War (1950–3) despite US diplomatic pressure.

Brazil's frustrated attempts to bargain substantial economic aid from the United States continued during the second Vargas administration (1951–4), but the fantasy of 'a special relationship' began to crumble.²⁵ Conditions were now, both domestically and internationally, very different from the 1940s, when Vargas exchanged Brazilian support for US investments and credit. As argued by Mônica Hirst, Vargas's bargaining position was significantly undermined by a bipolar post-war world in which the United

²³The scholarship on Dutra's foreign policy and the nature of Brazil's alignment with the United States is marked by different approaches, some emphasising the role of internal factors, others highlighting the impact of the external conjuncture. Gerson Moura argues that Brazil's consistent pro-US stance in regional and international fora such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States – despite its failure to secure strategic investments from the United States – was the result of widespread anti-Communist sentiments among powerful sectors of Brazilian society (including the armed forces) as well as (pro-US) laissez-faire liberal tendencies among conservative elites supporting Dutra's government. Paulo Roberto de Almeida, on the other hand, is critical of what he sees as an exaggerated emphasis on internal factors; he highlights the importance of the international context, particularly the commitments made by Brazil in Breton Woods, and points to the restrictions imposed by the rapid political polarisation in the post-war era as factors that considerably limited Brazil's capacity to bargain for US credit and investments in exchange for geopolitical alignment. While reassessing the debate and considering additional sources, Pedro Paulo Zahluth Bastos recalibrates the relevance of both internal and external factors but argues that Dutra's government missed a crucial opportunity to obtain special conditions regarding credit and investment from the United States. The US military-industrial complex was dependent on strategic minerals produced in Brazil such as monazite, manganese, thorium, beryllium, tungsten and uranium. See Gerson Moura, 'As razões do alinhamento: A política externa brasileira no pós-guerra, 1946–1950', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 28: 1 (1985), pp. 37–50 and *As relações exteriores do Brasil 1939–1950: Mudanças na natureza das relações Brasil-Estados Unidos durante e após a Segunda Guerra Mundial* (Brasília: Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão, 2012); Paulo Roberto de Almeida, 'A diplomacia do liberalismo econômico: As relações econômicas internacionais do Brasil durante a presidência Dutra', in J. A. Guilhon Albuquerque (ed.), *Sessenta anos de política externa brasileira (1930–1990)*, vol. 1: *Crescimento, modernização e política externa* (São Paulo: Cultura Editores Associados, 1996), pp. 237–94; Pedro Paulo Zahluth Bastos, 'Liberal esclarecido ou aliado fiel? Sobre a natureza da política externa brasileira no governo Dutra (1946–1951)', *Revista Economia*, 11: 4 (2010), pp. 285–320.

²⁴See, for example, Roberto Baptista Junior, 'A participação do governo Getúlio Vargas (1951–1954) na deposição de Jacobo Arbenz e o fim da aliança estratégica entre Brasil e Estados Unidos', *Revista de História de América*, 149: 2 (2013), pp. 79–126; and the forthcoming work of Rodrigo Véliz Estrada, discussed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtUGvXTSCUs>

²⁵See Danilo José Dalio and Shiguenoli Miyamoto, 'O governo Vargas e a Comissão Mista Brasil-Estados Unidos', *Idéias UNICAMP*, 1: 2 (2010), pp. 151–81.

States considered Latin America a relatively secured area of influence *vis-à-vis* regions perceived as more central in the new context of increasing geopolitical tensions, such as Europe and East Asia.²⁶

Truman's foreign policy approach in Latin America was structured along two fronts: the so-called 'Point Four Program' from January 1949 – based on programmes of technical cooperation and development – and the 'Campaign of Truth' – based on propaganda campaigns to counter Soviet influence and anti-American sentiment – and launched in April 1950. The Point Four Program was designed to channel funding to regions perceived as critical in terms of commodities and supply of key materials to the US military-industrial sector (such as strategic minerals) but not immediately threatened by the USSR's military expansion. Although the Point Four Program was heavily inspired by the work of the OCIAA in the region, the initiative relied more heavily on the cooperation between the private and public sectors, as the budget approved for the programme by the US Congress was considerably lower than expected.²⁷ In fact, when compared to the budget of the Marshall Plan and the US investment programmes in Asia, the Point Four Program was very modest.²⁸ In 1950, for example, Brazil received only US\$5 million in cooperation projects.²⁹ On the other hand, the Campaign of Truth represented a considerable increase in investments in information operations. In 1950, USIE established a series of cooperation agreements with Brazil that included the establishment of binational cultural institutes, information offices, libraries, centres for the screening of films and exchange programmes.³⁰ These agreements allowed the local USIS to officialise initiatives that had been in place since WW2.³¹ By the end of 1951, and after the first 18 months of Truman's Campaign of Truth, USIE exchange programmes had expanded considerably – globally, the number of people brought to the United States for the Foreign Leader Program increased from 3,900 in 1950 to 10,000 in 1951, and the output of documentary films increased 300 per cent.³²

²⁶ Mônica Hirst, *O pragmatismo impossível: A política externa do segundo governo Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1990), p. 55.

²⁷ Scholars such as Claude C. Erb have argued that the Point Four Program was inspired by Rockefeller's work in Latin America during World War 2 through the OCIAA. Investment by Truman's Point Four Program in Brazil was coordinated by the Comissão Mista Brasil–Estados Unidos (Joint Brazil–United States Economic Development Commission, CMBEU). The CMBEU was a bilateral institution designed in 1950 (during Dutra's government) and active between 1951 and 1953. Its mission was to design projects for strategic investment in infrastructure and development in Brazil aimed at attracting funds from institutions such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the US Export and Import Bank (EXIM). See Claude C. Erb, 'Prelude to Point Four: The Institute of Inter-American Affairs', *Diplomatic History*, 9: 3 (1985), pp. 249–69; Nathalia Candido Stutz Gomes, 'A Comissão Mista Brasil–Estados Unidos para o Desenvolvimento Econômico (CMBEU) (1951–1953) à luz do Programa Ponto Quatro (1949) do governo Truman', *Revista Carta Internacional*, 17: 1 (2022), pp. 1–23; and Natália Abreu Damasceno, 'O programa Ponto IV e a articulação de projetos estadunidenses de desenvolvimento para a América Latina (1949–1954)', unpubl. PhD diss., Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 2022.

²⁸ Bastos, 'Liberal esclarecido ou aliado fiel?', p. 298.

²⁹ Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 53.

³⁰ Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil*, p. 164.

³¹ Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 55.

³² The worldwide circulation of books and pamphlets had also increased considerably: from 1.5 million items in 1950 to 3.7 in 1951. Thanks to cooperation with the private sector, film distribution could reach an estimated audience of 400 million people. See Cull, *The Cold War*, p. 67.

In 1950–1, USIE established a series of covert actions in collaboration with Brazil's Conselho de Defesa Nacional (National Defence Council) that included the dissemination of anti-Communist radio broadcasting, films and material to the press.³³ By 1952, the recently created IIA had developed a defined vision for Latin America, based on pro-US information campaigns with a focus on unions, workers and labour movements: it included four hours of radio broadcasts daily (through the VOA) and films and newsreels disseminated to more than 500,000 people per year.³⁴ Under the IIA, USIS local offices in Latin America and the Caribbean (42 distributed across 20 countries) gained more autonomy to establish specific directives and propose actions adapted to local context through 'Country Plans'. In Brazil, in 1952, the activity of the IIA via local USIS offices is described thus:

Otherwise inaccessible people in the interior were reached by mobile units; there were 27 film showings in one location before 44,000 persons; USIS films are used by missionaries and churches. Locally produced radio programs include the Neto Commentary, which is used by 310 stations six days a week, appears in 1,154 newspapers, and is voiced over 232 address systems. Approximately 40% of USIS releases are regularly published in 360 newspapers and magazines.³⁵

Radio announcer Al Neto was one of the stars of the USIS radio shows in Brazil. They were broadcast by several stations in the country via secret contracts signed between USIS and station owners, including media magnate Assis Chateaubriand, who received around UD\$ 5,000 per month to broadcast USIS programmes in *Diários Associados* network.³⁶ In addition to radio broadcasts, studies on USIS penetration into the Brazilian press and editorial market (e.g. via translations and the publication of anti-Communist material) have demonstrated the increasing role of covert actions in USIS' modus operandi.³⁷ However, in contrast to that of the USIS in Mexico, the role of the USIS film division in Brazil is still under-studied.³⁸

Fisher and USIS Propaganda Spectacles

Alan Fisher became a USIS motion picture officer in 1947, and as such he was responsible for information campaigns using USIS films in Brazil.³⁹ This included consolidating

³³Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil*, p. 171.

³⁴Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 67.

³⁵Santomauro quotes from a document filed at the National Archives, College Park, MD, in *ibid.*, pp. 67, 300 [transcription] 59; typos corrected silently.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 239.

³⁷See, for example, Mozer, 'A arquitetura da dominação'; Rafael R. Ioris and Josiane Mozer, 'Parceiros em quê? A Aliança para o Progresso e a política editorial de modernização da América Latina no contexto da Guerra Fria', *Esboços*, 26: 43 (2019), pp. 529–48; and Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency'.

³⁸For the work of USIS film division in Mexico, see Seth Fein, 'Everyday Forms of Transnational Collaboration: U.S. Film Propaganda in Cold War Mexico', in Joseph *et al.* (eds.), *Close Encounters of Empire*, pp. 400–50; and 'Producing the Cold War in Mexico: The Public Limits of Covert Communications', in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (eds.), *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounters with the Cold War* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 171–213.

³⁹Schmidt, 'Interview with Alan Fisher'.

and expanding the network of relationships between the US embassy and local authorities, institutions and strategic partners that could facilitate the circulation of pro-US propaganda films. The three photographic series we will discuss in this article document the screening of USIS films in factories and rural communities in Brazil between 1950 and 1953. These screenings explicitly targeted both rural and urban workers and their children. They were the result of the USIS local offices' impressive capacity to develop flexible agreements and dynamic partnerships with a great variety of institutions and influential individuals, including state governments, local authorities, landowners, religious leaders and employers' associations. The objectives were to disseminate educational films, cartoons and newsreels infused with pro-US and anti-Communist propaganda. Two of these series focus on rural communities in the countryside of the states of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro; the third focuses on factory workers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Fisher makes it very clear in different passages of his visual reports (which were also accompanied by written text) that these photos were just samples of USIS national operations, which included cities dispersed across all of Brazil's regions that were covered by US consulates-general. The extensive reach of these campaigns was possible due to two main factors. First, partnerships with local authorities and institutions allowed USIS films to be widely distributed and used in events and initiatives that were not directly created by, or connected to, the US embassy and consulates-general. Secondly, the USIS motion picture division deployed mobile units to create itinerant screenings of films in events directly funded by, and overtly connected to, the US embassy and consulates-general; these were basically trucks adapted to transport electricity generators and temporary projection screens to areas without screening infrastructure or electricity, allowing USIS films to be shown in remote areas of the countryside, including where rural populations had not been exposed to cinema before.

In his interview with G. Lewis Schmidt, Fisher states:

[R]emember there was no television in those days, so we were the big entertainment feature in the interior. We had mobile units that had generators, had light stringers and public address systems, and we'd send them off into the interior on a tour. They would pull into a town where there was no electricity, and there wasn't much in the rural areas in those days.

The first call would be on the mayor and say they were just going to show films in their town and hoped he would be present. He said he would, always. They would put up light stringers in the public square ... Just about everybody in the town would show up. They'd start the generators and light up the public square, and the people would see their square lit at night for the first time in their lives. Then they would show films.⁴⁰

As becomes clear in Fisher's interview, the appeal of USIS film screening campaigns relied heavily on the notion of entertainment and technological novelty: electric lighting, music and sound (the public address system), and the coming together of people

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

to experience US spectacular modernity first-hand through cinema. This was an experience which would drag people out of their everyday life and immerse them (at least for a couple of hours) in an experience that would transcend the content of these films through different forms of sensory stimulus. Local authorities (such as the mayor) would lend their legitimising presence to these events – corroborating their importance for local communities – and, at the same time, benefit politically from their association with the show of light, sound and moving images that constituted those spectacles.

I am calling these political-performative events ‘propaganda spectacles’ because not only did they project US modernity on the screen, but they also performed it through the display of wealth, infrastructure, logistics and technology that made these screenings possible. Performance is ‘any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed’; in other words, it is the ‘showing’ of a ‘doing’.⁴¹ At the core of any spectacle lies a transaction: in the space ‘between performers and audiences, there emerges a possibility for dialogue, and indeed for confrontation’.⁴² In this sense, propaganda spectacle is a genre of persuasive communication that assumes the form of a political-performative event. Due to its performative dimension, these events extend beyond what is being said or seen, incorporating not only the medium (in our case, the screen), but also the apparatus and material conditions that intersect to make their realisation viable. As a liminal space between spectatorship and the performance, the spectacle becomes a strategic place for propaganda’s subterfuge.

In Fisher’s words:

Reactions were varied. I have photographed a number of these, did some special reports on them, and have pictures of people on horseback, watching the movies. I had a report of someone who got so excited when he saw a newsreel of Hitler, he pulled out a pistol and shot at the screen. [Laughs] Wonderful things like that happened.

... we would get full cooperation from the town. So they just loved us to come and show films. Again, I say, no television. That was the only entertainment they had.⁴³

Indeed, it seems very likely that the spectacles promoted by USIS would have been met with ‘full cooperation’ in so far as local authorities and populations saw in it a cost-free form of entertainment, and conceivably an escape from work-intensive daily routines. However, communities that had never heard of cinema were certainly becoming a rarity in the 1950s. According to Brazil’s Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Institute of Geography and Statistics, IBGE), the country had 1,890 municipalities in 1950, and a population of approximately 52 million people. Yet, the 1949 census lists 2,248 registered cinemas in the country. They screened films 700,337 times in 1949, to a total audience of 185,668,090 people. The capital, Rio de Janeiro, and the state of São Paulo had the biggest audiences, while states in the northeast such as Maranhão

⁴¹Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 2; Milija Gluhovic *et al.*, ‘Introduction: Politics and/as Performance, Performance and/as Politics’, in Shirin Rai *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Politics and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 5.

⁴²Gluhovic *et al.*, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

⁴³Schmidt, ‘Interview with Alan Fisher’.

and cities in the north like Rio Branco had the smallest audiences, reflecting regional economic and infrastructural inequalities.⁴⁴

Cinema in Brazil, from its inception in the last decade of the nineteenth century, had always been associated both with modernity and the penetration of foreign influences. During WWI, Hollywood films became a 'major presence in the Brazilian market', overtaking European productions, mainly from France, Italy and Denmark.⁴⁵ By the early 1920s the most important Hollywood studios – such as Fox Film, Paramount, Universal, Warner Brothers, First National, Columbia – had representatives in Brazil, and by 1929 the proportion of US films screened in the country was 86 per cent, completely displacing European productions and marginalising domestic ones.⁴⁶ The growing presence of US films was not an isolated process: it was part of the country's growing trade and economic influence in Latin America, with US exports surpassing those from Britain and France in the 1920s. This was followed by the fading of British political influence, and the growing projection of US imperial presence in the region.

In Latin American countries, cinema and the formation of spectatorship was deeply associated with the process of forging national citizenry between the 1930s to 1950s. In Mexico, for example, it had a key role in creating a sense of national identity among rural Indigenous populations migrating to the suburbs of Mexico City in the 1930s.⁴⁷ But this was only possible because this essentially urban form of entertainment provided a mediation between the values projected on the screen (and associated with the ruling elites) and the aspirations and interests of these working classes.⁴⁸ In Brazil, Vargas' Estado Novo (1937–45) saw cinema as an instrument of his conservative modernisation, and as an opportunity to 'educate' Brazilians, via state propaganda, and forge a process of national integration centralised on the state.⁴⁹ Vargas' DIP, created in 1939, had a film section, responsible for the production of newsreels that would be screened in cinemas across the country – usually before the screening of commercial productions. Vargas invested an unprecedented amount of energy and resources in 'organising' (and censoring) the production and circulation of popular culture, including folk music like samba, and popular street festivals such as Carnival.⁵⁰ This created an environment in which elements of popular culture from different regions were

⁴⁴ IBGE, 'Estatísticas do Século XX': <https://seculoxx.ibge.gov.br/populacionais-sociais-politicas-e-culturais/busca-por-temas/cultura.html>.

⁴⁵ Maite Conde, *Foundational Films: Early Cinema and Modernity in Brazil* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2018), p. 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86. As shown by Ross Melnick, Hollywood studios were not only in the business of production and circulation, but they also rapidly expanded their presence to include ownership of local cinemas. See Ross Melnick, *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power around the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

⁴⁷ See Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (Naucalpan: G. Gili, 1998 [1st edn 1987]); and Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Bonfil, *A través del espejo: El cine mexicano y su público* (Mexico City: IMCINE/El Milagro, 1994).

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Kantaris and Rory O'Bryen, 'Introduction: The Fragile Contemporaneity of the Popular', in Kantaris and O'Bryen (eds.), *Latin American Popular Culture: Politics, Media, Affect* (Martlesham: Tamesis Books, 2013), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁹ Sônia Cristina Lino, 'Projetando um Brasil moderno: Cultura e cinema na década de 1930', *Locus: Revista de História*, 13: 2 (2007), pp. 161–78.

⁵⁰ See Lisa Shaw, *The Social History of the Brazilian Samba* (London: Routledge, 2019).

coopted, amalgamated and instrumentalised by the regime in an attempt to forge an official (and homogenised) national culture. But this process of co-optation was not one-sided. As the commercial production of films in Brazil gained traction in the 1930s and 1940s, some producers – such as Adhemar Gonzaga – were not only keen to receive but would actively demand the support and patronage of the government.⁵¹ Gonzaga, who visited the United States and was an admirer of the Hollywood commercial model, was also aware of the huge difference in the material conditions of the Brazilian studios and film industry. The creation of a commercially successful radio star-system in the 1930s and 1940s – and the emphasis placed by Vargas' regime on this medium – meant that film directors and producers would constantly pitch their movies to radio audiences in order to make them financially viable. In this way, Brazilian cinematic musical comedies – the *chanchadas* – centred around samba tunes and carnival motifs, became an established formula in the period.

However, many of these musical comedies from the 1940s and early 1950s incorporate, adapt, internalise, subvert and capitalise on Hollywood formulas and the exoticisation of Brazil (and of Brazilians) in US films. US cinematic representations of Brazil (and of other Latin American countries) in the first three decades of the twentieth century were marked by stereotypes, as well as linguistic, geographic and cultural misunderstandings. In the 1930s and 1940s, during the Good Neighbor policy era, productions about Brazil and other Latin American countries that featured themes, music, motifs and actors from the region invaded Hollywood.⁵² But rather than being passive objects of these picturesque, exoticised (and eroticised) representations, many Latin Americans instrumentalised the US imperial gaze and used it in their favour. The case of Brazil is emblematic. There is clear evidence that Vargas's regime capitalised on Hollywood's representation of Brazil to promote the country as an exporter of strategic primary goods to the United States during WW2.⁵³ Carmen Miranda, the Brazilian actress who took Broadway and Hollywood by storm in 1939, became the symbol of Good Neighbor cinema. Miranda helped to shape the representation of Brazil as an acceptable 'tropical other' in US films in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s: the iconic image that she projected was of an extravagant and 'whitewashed' Bahian, which was crystallised in 1940s Hollywood productions and consistently instrumentalised domestically and abroad as a form of strategic essentialism to communicate Brazilianness (and Brazilian interests) to foreigners.⁵⁴

Propaganda Spectacles in Rural Areas

While Brazilians were no strangers to cinema by the early 1950s, regional inequalities meant that some rural communities were at a considerable disadvantage when it came

⁵¹ Lino, 'Projetando um Brasil moderno', p. 170.

⁵² For example, by 1943, 30 films with themes and scenes on/about Latin America had been released and 25 were in the making; by 1945, the number of productions reached 85. See Ana M. López, 'Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism', in John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado (eds.), *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas* (London: BFI, 1991), p. 70.

⁵³ Lisa Shaw and Maite Conde, 'O Brasil visto por Hollywood: Do cinema mudo a Carmen Miranda', *Trama Interdisciplinar*, 8: 3 (2017), p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

to infrastructure, including access to electricity, as suggested by Fisher in his interview. This, however, does not seem to have been the case with Alvinópolis, the municipality targeted by one of Fisher's reports. The visual report entitled 'USIE Motion Pictures in Alvinópolis, Brazil' was submitted to the State Department on 15 August 1950. It was included in a memorandum by Alan Fisher with the heading: 'My visit to Farmer's Week in Alvinópolis, Minas Gerais, July 28–30, 1950' (Supplementary Image 1).⁵⁵ Fisher introduces the visual report as follows:

Attached is a report on my visit to Alvinópolis, Minas Gerais, for the purpose of seeing how our films are being used by the Minas Gerais State Department of Agriculture in its instruction program.

It is interesting to note that the three different organizations taking part in Farmer's Week activities are all users of USIE films. *We really hit those farmers from all sides.*⁵⁶

Alvinópolis is a small agricultural municipality about 185 km (115 miles) from the State capital Belo Horizonte (Supplementary Image 2). The current population, according to the 2022 census, is estimated to be 15,059.⁵⁷ In 1950, according to Fisher's report, the town had a population of approximately 3,000, and the whole municipality of about 14,000. Fisher was invited to attend the agricultural fair by the director of the Comissão de Ensino Agrário Ambulante (Mobile Agricultural Training Service, EAA) of Minas Gerais. Fisher's declared tactical objective was to observe how the EAA (established in 1948) had been using USIS films since 1949 to support its campaigns to teach farmers 'modern methods of agriculture, health and sanitation'.⁵⁸ According to the report, the EAA campaigns arranged for convoys to visit agricultural areas; these included a medical doctor, to teach basic principles of sanitation and to administer vaccinations; an agronomist, to teach about the latest agricultural methods; a nurse to assist the doctor; a veterinarian to treat livestock and to train farmers; a motion picture projectionist to screen films and a radio operator for communicating with the central office in Belo Horizonte. Fisher was accompanied by US Agricultural Attaché John Hopkins. They travelled by plane from Rio to Belo Horizonte bringing with them 'some agricultural and health films to supplement other USIE films ... supplied to the EAA few months before'.⁵⁹

The report's level of granular detail is impressive. Fisher describes the commodities being produced in the region (maize, sugar cane, beans, milk) as well as manufactures (spirits, brown sugar, butter). He discusses the local economy (including rural workers' average wages), aspects of local infrastructure (including references to the local hydro-electric plant) and the main issues affecting agricultural productivity: 'leaf cutting ants, soil erosion, health and sanitation, poor roads, poor soil with a calcium deficiency, and lack of cooperation among the farmers'.⁶⁰ He obtained this information from EAA

⁵⁵ Alan Fisher's images are reproduced in the Supplementary Material.

⁵⁶ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 15 Aug. 1950, AFA; emphasis added.

⁵⁷ IBGE, 'Alvinópolis': <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/mg/alvinopolis/panorama>.

⁵⁸ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 15 Aug. 1950, AFA.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

staff members Mário Assis de Lucena (an agronomist) and Policarpio Diniz Hanriot (a geographer), who clearly did not think sharing all this data with an officer of the US embassy was an issue. Regarding local cultural infrastructure, and political–ideological affiliations, Fisher’s report states:

There are two movie houses in town, one with a single 35mm projector, and the other with a 16mm Bell and Howell in a small projection booth. Between the two houses they give shows five nights a week. Admission price is three cruzeiros, and *all films are American productions.*

The church is extremely active in the community life and problems, and among other things started the agricultural school, domestic school and the night school for the adults. Monsenhor Rafael Bicalho has been there 34 years and is given credit by the townspeople for playing the leading role in the educational and agricultural movements.

*Communism has but one follower, a young lawyer, who last year tried an anti-American campaign without success. As a result of his campaign he is now, according to the mayor, ‘All alone’.*⁶¹

Alvinópolis was not short of cinemas or electricity. Local exposure to US cinematic productions made USIS film screenings particularly attractive, not only due to the association between cinema and entertainment, but also because the USIS films were exhibited for free, in contrast to commercial productions.

According to his report, three organisations participated in the Farmers’ Week: the above-mentioned EAA; the Comissão Brasileira-Americana de Educação das Populações Rurais (Federal Commission for Rural Education, CBAR), part of the Ministry of Agriculture; and the Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural (Rural Credit and Assistance Association, ACAR), the result of a collaboration between the state of Minas Gerais and Rockefeller’s American International Association for Social and Economic Development (AIA). The CBAR was created in 1945 as the result of a US–Brazil cooperation programme to increase agrarian productivity and strengthen supplies of food and other strategic primary goods. The programme was preceded by a series of agreements between the United States and Brazil signed during WW2, including the creation of the Comissão Brasileiro-Americana de Produção de Gêneros Alimentícios (Brazilian–American Food Production Commission).⁶² These agreements facilitated the importation of new agrarian techniques, machines and agricultural inputs and had a significant impact on Brazilian agriculture.⁶³

ACAR was created by Rockefeller in 1948. It was based on the experience of the above-mentioned FSA, founded in 1937 to fight rural poverty during the Great Depression through supervised rural credit and technical assistance. The creation of ACAR was the result of an agreement signed between Rockefeller’s AIA and the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

⁶² Sonia Regina de Mendonça, ‘Ensino agrícola e influência norte-americana no Brasil (1945–1961)’, *Tempo*, 15: 29 (2010), pp. 139–65; here p. 147.

⁶³ Earl Richard Downes, ‘Transforming Brazilian Agriculture: The Experience of the Brazilian–American Commission for the Production of Foodstuffs, 1942–1945’, *Diálogos Latinoamericanos*, 30 (2021), pp. 1–22.

state of Minas Gerais.⁶⁴ Other ACARs were created in cooperation with different Brazilian states during the first half of the 1950s, and a national agency to coordinate the work of these associations was created in 1956, the Associação Brasileira de Crédito e Assistência Rural (Brazilian Rural Credit and Assistance Association, ACBAR). Using his decade-long experience in Latin America, Rockefeller's alleged mission in the establishment of the AIA was to raise living standards and encourage agricultural modernisation and development in Latin America with a particular focus on Brazil and Venezuela. It played a key role in US–Brazil relations that drew on a model of diplomacy involving private enterprise. According to Claiton Marcio da Silva:

the AIA's activities were guided by a new form of intervention in Latin America, away from the Big Stick Policy and closer to a benevolent rhetoric. Ideally, the AIA aimed to serve as a bridge by which the successful projects of the Good Neighbor Policy would reach a post-war world, no longer as a state policy, but as a diplomacy enacted by private groups.⁶⁵

The AIA frequently replicated in Latin American countries programmes and strategies originally designed to address US issues. Its modernisation strategies were US-centred and marked by a 'lack of knowledge about the culture of local people and their traditional knowledge' as well as by 'the inconsistencies of bureaucratic political elites'.⁶⁶ It was, nevertheless, an important force in implementing a political agenda that was aligned with Truman's Point Four Program.⁶⁷ In this context, Rockefeller's AIA was part of a project that incorporated private enterprise and philanthropical rhetoric to project US hegemony in the region.⁶⁸

The Farmers' Week programme had slots for each of the above organisations to provide lectures to farmers on agricultural and health matters. According to Fisher, 'all the films, with the exception of a few cartoons, were USIE films'. Among the films shown were *Dryland Farming*, *Rural Co-op*, *Hay is What You make It* and *Cattle and the Corn*

⁶⁴Shawn Moura, 'Modernization through Home Economics: The American International Association in Brazil, 1947–1961', Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports, 2017, p. 6: <https://rockarch.issuelab.org/resources/28262/28262.pdf>.

⁶⁵Claiton Marcio da Silva, *The Making of Modern Agriculture: Nelson Rockefeller's American International Association (AIA) in Latin America (1946–1968)* (Winwick: The White Horse Press, 2023), p. 6.

⁶⁶*Ibid.* For the historiography on Rockefeller's AIA and its intervention in Latin America, see also Claiton Marcio da Silva, 'Nelson Rockefeller e a atuação da American International Association for Economic and Social Development: Debates sobre missão e imperialismo no Brasil, 1946–1961', *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 20: 4 (2013), pp. 1695–1711. The author discusses how the 1990's 'cultural turn' complexified historiographic debate, moving from binary approaches that presented Rockefeller enterprises as either based on 'missionary' or purely 'imperialist' motivations to analysis that incorporated discursive strategies, power relations and material practices to foreground Latin Americans' agency in these interactions.

⁶⁷On the role of Rockefeller in the Point Four Program, see Moura, 'Modernization'.

⁶⁸Particularly pertinent here is Inderjeet Parmar's neo-Gramscian approach to the 'Big 3' (the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations). Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). For a nuanced discussion about the relationship between structure and agency within Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, see also Jonathan Pass, *American Hegemony in the 21st Century: A Neo Neo-Gramscian Perspective* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); and 'Gramsci Meets Emergentist Materialism: Towards a Neo Neo-Gramscian Perspective on World Order', *Review of International Studies*, 44: 4 (2018), pp. 595–618.

Belt.⁶⁹ Fisher and Agricultural Attaché Hopkins stayed in Alvinópolis for two nights – they extended their stay an extra night after being cordially invited by the town's mayor. They attended several film screenings and lectures (Supplementary Image 3); and in the evening dined with the local authorities and influential figures, including Catholic leader Monsenhor Rafael Bicalho. They also attended a special screening for children, organised by the EAA, with educational cartoons, including *Keep Them Out*, and Disney's *Hookworm* (Supplementary Image 4).⁷⁰ We know very little about the former cartoon, but the latter was commissioned by Rockefeller's OCIAA and released in 1945. It tells the story of a boy, Careless Charlie, and his family who are all infected with hookworm; the film depicts their journey seeking proper medication and developing sanitary precautions to avoid reinfection. Although designed for Latin American audiences, the film was extensively used in other contexts, such as in colonial Africa.⁷¹

Fisher is keen to highlight in his report that this was a particularly successful campaign, and the US embassy was effusively thanked by local authorities and the institutions organising the Farmers' Week. For example, after the final evening of lectures and screenings, Fisher describes the reactions of local authorities and the audience: 'Once again there were long speeches thanking the American Embassy for its kind cooperation in making educational films available, and in sending its representatives to visit Alvinópolis ... The response was enthusiastic.'⁷²

The overt aspect of these campaigns – the fact that these propaganda spectacles are directly attributed to the US embassy – seems consistent with USIS practice in the early 1950, when material planted in the press and on radio stations was still clearly attributable to USIS. The historiography on the USIS, however, shows that, with time, more and more material (and campaigns) would be unattributed, and covert operations would become the norm, particularly after the creation of the USIA in 1953.⁷³

As we will see below, there is a consistent semiotic dynamic in these photographic series, marked by the role of light in the composition. With very few exceptions, children and workers are usually portrayed in the half-dark of the screening room, with their faces illuminated by the light reflected from the screen (Supplementary Images 1 and 4). This seems to create an inexorable visual metaphor: that of enlightenment via exposure to USIS film screenings. This is certainly the case with the second photographic series dedicated to rural communities, entitled 'Rural Brazil sees USIS Films'.

The photos in this series were taken in the municipality of São José do Vale do Rio Preto (SJVRP), in the state of Rio de Janeiro, and include images of rural workers in Córrego Sujo, a village 25 km (15 miles) from downtown SJVRP (Supplementary

⁶⁹ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 15 Aug. 1950, AFA.

⁷⁰ The constant presence of children at screenings shows that they were systematically targeted by USIS campaigns. For example, another series in the AFA, from 1951, is entitled 'USIE Film Showings in Rio de Janeiro Public Schools'. The report makes it clear that public schools in Rio de Janeiro were part of a well-organised programme of screenings of USIS films in overt collaboration with the local education department. See Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 23 Nov. 1951, AFA.

⁷¹ See Kenneth Pickering, 'Another Walt Disney Experiment', *Community Development Bulletin*, 6: 1 (1954), pp. 2–4.

⁷² Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 15 Aug. 1950, AFA.

⁷³ See Cull, *The Cold War*; and Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency'.

Images 5–8). There are also a few images of townspeople belonging to different professions: a farm owner, a bookkeeper, a shop owner, a priest and a teacher (Supplementary Image 9). Fisher includes a photo of SJVRP's local library, with books, posters and other material produced by USIS on display (Supplementary Image 10). Although we have brief descriptions of the photos on their reverse, we do not have a written report attached to this series, so the photos are undated. Interestingly, unlike the other series, Fisher refers to the films being screened as USIS, rather than USIE, films. I am using this terminology to date this series to 1952.⁷⁴

Regarding the films screened at a poultry farm in Córrego Sujo, Fisher states on the reverse of one of the photos:

Films shown here were *Water, Friend or Enemy*; *County Agent*; *Poultry Raising*; *Rural Co-Op*; and *Chicken Little*. The last film was particularly liked because of the chicken theme, but *it was accepted generally as a straight cartoon. Only the educated understood the political implications, but as these are the local leaders, the film accomplished its purpose.*⁷⁵

In this description, Fisher explicitly addresses the deceptive nature of these screenings. The case of the Disney cartoon *Chicken Little* (1943) is illustrative. The film is based on the folk tale of the same name (better known in the United Kingdom as 'Henny Penny'), in which a young chick, scared after an object falls on its head, becomes convinced that the world is ending. The cautionary tale against moral panic and hysteria, which appears in different folk tale collections in Europe from the early nineteenth century, is adapted by Disney in 1943 to advise children (and parents) against the spreading of rumours and the potential risk of disinformation. In the Disney version, a fox consults a volume on psychological warfare and chooses *Chicken Little* as the target for a disinformation campaign designed to create division and undermine leadership in the hen house. Although the cartoon begins with light and humorous scenes, the end is particularly dark and shows the fox feasting on the chicken. The Disney version, commissioned by the US government during WW2, contains no direct references to Nazi or fascist propaganda, so it was easily adaptable to the new context of the escalation of tensions with the USSR and the Korean War. USIS strategy is quite evident in Fisher's description: passing as a 'straight cartoon' – an innocent form of entertainment – the film is surreptitiously addressing the potential risks of joining any form of campaign (Communist or otherwise) that could undermine local authorities and the status quo.

USIS 'educational' films on sanitation and agricultural techniques also have surreptitious semantic layers. While addressing specific issues – e.g. the positive impact of agricultural industrialisation in the US Middle West, like in the USIS film *Cattle and the Corn Belt* – the audience is immersed in an experience of sound, light and moving images that presents the US form of agricultural production and organisation as a model to be followed. Together with the 'American way' come the machines and chemical and pharmaceutical inputs that are sold as part of the US–Brazil cooperation

⁷⁴Local USIS offices gained more autonomy under the coordination of the IIA, established in 1952. This would explain why Fisher names the local information office (USIS) rather than the central USIE or the IIA. On the IIA, see Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 61.

⁷⁵Alan Fisher, Photobooks, n.d., AFA; emphasis added.

initiative, for example, via ACAR's rural supervised credit for small producers, mentioned above. The 'American way' promoted in these films forms part of a process of acculturation of Brazilian peasants, a process that decentres local traditions, practices and forms of knowledge, subsequently labelled 'pre-modern' and 'underdeveloped'.

The visit to Córrego Sujo is clearly part of a much bigger campaign:

The mobile unit will spend 60 days with the campaign and return to Rio for reassignment. After the mobile unit leaves, the Rural Educational Campaign will handle its own movie shows with USIS films. They have already purchased a Victor projector and an Onan 1,000 watt portable gasoline generator for this purpose.⁷⁶

The Campanha Nacional de Educação Rural no Brasil (Brazil's National Rural Education Campaign, CNER) was established during the second Vargas administration in 1952 to implement initiatives targeting rural workers and small farmers.⁷⁷ It received funding from US–Brazil bilateral cooperation agreements (including private associations like Rockefeller's AIA) and was developed in connection with the programmes of supervised credit (ACARs) and agricultural 'modernisation' that have already been discussed. These campaigns included 'rural missions', farmers' fairs (like the one in Alvinópolis), and campaigns to promote agricultural techniques and rural education. They constituted a series of orchestrated interventions meant to restructure and re-signify what were considered unproductive, archaic and backward ways of living and producing; they were, in the words of Nelson Romero, director of the Department of National Education, 'a magnificent instrument for the improvement of the rural man'.⁷⁸ These campaigns were informed by what Brazilian historian Sonia Regina de Mendonça calls a 'salvation theory', which ultimately infantilised these populations, and pathologised the illiteracy, poverty and lack of basic infrastructure they had been historically subjected to.⁷⁹ From 1953 onwards, these US–Brazil cooperation initiatives were centrally coordinated by the Escritório Técnico de Agricultura Brasileiro–Americano (Brazil–US Office of Agricultural Techniques, ETA) with funding from Truman's Point Four Program.

The emphasis on educational initiatives that promoted the reorganisation of production and the industrialisation of agriculture was meant not only to support small farmers and agriculturalists, but also to steer them away from any form of insurgency motivated by the harshness of their material conditions. The denunciation of rural poverty, illiteracy, labour precarity, the fight against agrarian violence and for agrarian reform were, after all, part of the agenda of the Ligas Camponesas (Peasant Leagues), a movement promoted and supported by the PCB in 1945 to create associations of rural workers. These associations were repressed in 1947 (when the PCB was declared

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷See Nilce Vieira Campos Ferreira, 'Professoras missionárias "pessoas de rara dedicação e boa vontade": Campanha Nacional de Educação Rural no Brasil (1952–1963)', *Anuario Mexicano de Historia de la Educación*, 1: 1 (2018), pp. 115–32.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁹De Mendonça, 'Ensino agrícola', p. 149.

illegal), but resurfaced in 1954 to become a major player in a debate about agrarian issues.

The campaigns documented by Fisher were designed to increase the production of primary goods important in global supply chains and to promote the importation of machines and agricultural inputs from the United States, but they also intersected with the escalation of tensions with the USSR that marked the 1950s. This is also the context in which the very notion of 'development' is coined, and 'development policies' (and the institutional apparatuses created to fund and implement them) became instrumentalised as pervasive forms of control and 'supervision' of entire populations.⁸⁰ This new form of interventionism – directly connected to the invention of notions such as the Third World – presented poverty and social inequality in regions like Latin America as a condition to be remedied by the introduction of development models imported from United States, instead of by addressing the historical injustices that produced them in the first place.

The set of assumptions, preconceptions and beliefs that shaped some US Cold War development policies targeting countries in the Global South led historian Michael E. Latham to present them as a form of ideology.⁸¹ Some of the principles developed by US social scientists as modernisation theories in the 1950s and 1960s were swiftly incorporated by policymakers anxious to assert US hegemony in a dangerously polarised world. These theories were infused with 'a deeper, much older set of cultural assumptions', some of them reminiscent of the foundational myths of US history, such as the Manifest Destiny.⁸² According to Latham, modernisation, as an ideology, operated as 'a conceptual framework that articulated a common collection of assumptions about the nature of American society and its ability to transform a world perceived as both materially and culturally deficient'.⁸³

Representational technologies are the means by which statements about different cultures are created and disseminated. They constitute 'the stuff of empire' as much as diplomatic, economic and military action.⁸⁴ In this sense, Fisher's photos of rural workers (and their children) are integrated into the discursive configuration of these populations as underdeveloped subjects *vis-à-vis* their 'developed' counterparts in the North. As such, their condition as individuals is not stable; their subjectivities are available to be transformed, reshaped and 'saved'. In contrast to the authorities and people occupying positions of local leadership (clerics, teachers, landowners etc.), who are named in Fisher's reports, these workers are not identified: they have no names, and usually are not looking at the camera. As unnamed and 'underdeveloped' subjects, their images are captured and semiotically appropriated by a dual procedure. First, they are framed and disidentified by a representational device – the USIS reporting system.

⁸⁰See, for example, Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and John Patrick Leary, *A Cultural History of Underdevelopment: Latin America in the U.S. Imagination* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016).

⁸¹Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁴Salvatore, 'The Enterprise of Knowledge', p. 73.

Secondly, as the objects of an imperial gaze, their image is metonymically reconfigured to become the personification of Brazil's underdevelopment. This procedure, as we will see, is not limited to rural workers but also extends to include the growing multitudes of industrial workers in urban areas.

Propaganda Spectacles in Brazilian factories

The series entitled 'Brazilian Factory Workers See U.S.I.E. Films' is a good example of USIS campaigns in factories and urban centres. The images were taken between January and September 1950 in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo as examples of screenings of USIS films organised by the Serviço Social da Indústria (Industrial Social Service, SESI). These images were part of a visual report sent to the State Department on 27 November 1950 with the heading: 'Motion Pictures: SESI use of USIE films' (Supplementary Images 11–21).⁸⁵ SESI is an institution (still in operation) established in 1946 to offer social welfare and educational programmes to industrial workers. It was funded by state-regulated, and compulsory, contributions from private companies operating in the industrial sector. It was part of a process initiated during Vargas' Estado Novo to surveil and control the workforce through both labour laws and corporatist co-optation of unions at a moment when the country was experiencing a radical process of state-led industrialisation. From its inception, SESI was administered by the Confederação Nacional da Indústria (National Confederation of Industry, CNI), an organisation representing employers' associations. The CNI was clearly competing with left-wing political organisations in the process of organising, mobilising and attempting to shape the future of the Brazilian industrial workforce. In this sense, SESI was an 'avowedly ideological organization' engaged in steering workers away from any labour- or Communist-inspired forms of insurgency.⁸⁶ Its motto, as Alan Fisher's report notes, was: 'For Social Peace in Brazil'. Its widespread reach made SESI a very strategic partner for USIS:

In the Federal District and the State of Rio de Janeiro, SESI makes weekly showings at 96 factories and workers' clubs located in five different cities. For the period January–September, 1950, SESI in the Federal District utilized USIE films for 1,139 showings to 257,400 workers ... During the month of June, 1950, SESI made 38 showings in Santos [in the State of São Paulo] to 18,563 workers.⁸⁷

In addition to the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, SESI had film programmes in Paraná, Bahia and Pernambuco; in all of them USIS films played 'an important part in their operation'.⁸⁸ The equipment used in these SESI/USIS combined campaigns consisted of 19 Victor projectors; they also employed 16 operators. For the screenings in 1950, the USIS made available to SESI four prints of the USIS film *UN Aids the Republic*

⁸⁵ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 27 Nov. 1950, AFA.

⁸⁶ Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920–1964* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 138.

⁸⁷ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 27 Nov. 1950, AFA.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

of Korea. The film was screened, according to the report, in all 96 factories in Rio de Janeiro, after which they were distributed to SESI offices in other states.

The Korean War took up a good deal of USIS energy and resources. USIS campaigns included planting pro-US images and articles in newspapers and magazines, and disseminating books and films meant to manage public perception regarding US involvement in the conflict. Pro-US cartoons were also used to justify US involvement in the war.⁸⁹ From February 1952, USIS began to distribute its own magazine in Brazil, *Em Marcha*, inspired by the success of *Em Guarda* distributed by the OCIAA during WW2. The director of Brazil's USIS press division, Roberto Gonzaga, was crucial in establishing channels for the publication of material overtly and covertly produced by USIS in national newspapers such as *O Globo*, *Jornal do Brasil* and *Última Hora*.⁹⁰ However, although USIS press-targeted initiatives have received attention from historians, its strategic cooperation with SESI during this period has been neglected.

USIS cooperation with SESI was a direct response to the wave of strikes that marked Brazil's post-war period. It also reflects early Cold War anxieties regarding the spread of Communist propaganda in Latin America and conspiracy theories about 'Communist brainwashing'.⁹¹ Ultimately, their cooperation represented a cunning move to disseminate US political values and perspectives in a context marked by the escalation of tensions during the Korean War. The initiatives were also clearly informed by emerging development theories and modernisation ideology in the United States. In this sense, they represent US policymakers' efforts to 'educate' not only Brazilians workers, but also the political and economic elites on how to handle labour relations 'in order to maintain productivity, promote stability, and keep out communist agitators'.⁹²

This concern with labour relations in Brazil is already evident in a proposal designed by US Ambassador Adolf Berle Jr in September 1945 to develop a plan entitled 'Informational Program Directed toward Brazilian Labor', which included 'using films, books, news bulletins, and exhibitions'.⁹³ Disturbed, on the one hand, by the growing presence of the PCB in the labour movement and, on the other, concerned that propaganda campaigns could lead to accusations of 'interventionism', the State Department decided by mid-1946 that the initiative would work best if carried out directly by US labour unions. According to Cliff Welch, the State Department, in collaboration with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), selected Italian émigré and fervent anti-Communist trade unionist Serafino Romualti as the AFL inter-American representative. Romualti made several visits to Brazil to consolidate his relationship with unionists. By the end of Truman's final presidential mandate, AFL collaboration with the State Department had been consolidated, and their operations in Brazil were considered successful:

⁸⁹ Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 180.

⁹⁰ See Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil*, pp. 169–70; Santomauro, 'A United States Information Agency', p. 225.

⁹¹ Daniel Pick, *Brainwashed: A New History of Thought Control* (London: Wellcome Collection, 2022).

⁹² Cliff Welch, 'Labor Internationalism: U.S. Involvement in Brazilian Unions, 1945–1965', *Latin American Research Review*, 30: 2 (1995), p. 61.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

By 1952, the cornerstones of U.S. involvement in Brazilian unions were in place ... Communist and nationalist leaders had been isolated, alliances had been made with anticommunist leaders, and an institutional structure compatible with U.S. interests had been established. Yet not one of these achievements had been fulfilled according to any plan, *nor had action been taken on the propaganda and educational program proposed back in 1945.*⁹⁴

Fisher's reports on the collaboration between USIS and SESI contradict the idea that the State Department and the US embassy in Brazil had abandoned their propaganda and education program targeting Brazilian labor movements. If anything, the USIS–SESI collaboration shows that the strategy might have changed slightly: instead of targeting the unions, the US embassy was using SESI infrastructure to get direct access to Brazilian workers. Fisher includes in the report a conversation he had with Oscar da Silva Musa, SESI's local Director of Education and Recreational Activities in Santos:

During the discussion, Professor Musa said:

The films supplied by the Consulate General in São Paulo have been invaluable to us in our program of educating the workers. Just recently the Stevedore's Union here in Santos elected a Democratic president. This was a major victory for us, as this Union was for years the stronghold of Communism in this city. USIE films played a large part in our success. They were the means by which we were able to get to the workers with motion pictures showing the advantages of the Democratic way of life.⁹⁵

Interestingly, both Welch and Barbara Weinstein only factor SESI into the equation in 1953, when, under the auspices of Truman's Point Four Program, a group of ten Brazilian technicians from the Ministry of Agriculture and instructors from SESI arrived in the United States for a six-month training programme that included a focus on the history, structure and operations of US trade unions.⁹⁶ These visiting and exchange programmes increased considerably in 1955 and 1957. However, what becomes clear from reading Fisher's visual reports from 1950, 1951 and 1952 is that the USIS had in fact been implementing an ambitious propaganda campaign in both rural and urban centres at an earlier stage.

Informed and legitimised by US modernisation ideology, actioned by the State Department apparatus and implemented via extensive collaborations with local leaders and authorities, USIS campaigns were granular and had a considerable reach. The connections between SESI and USIS in 1950 are extensive and have also been neglected in the historiography on USIS in Brazil. They not only resulted from official and institutional collaboration agreements, but also benefited from a vast informal network that included personal contacts and the circulation of staff between institutions. For example, Nilo Mario Alphonso, SESI's 'Chief Operator', was a former employee of the US embassy's Information Program and was 'most cooperative in working with the USIE

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 71–2; emphasis added.

⁹⁵Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 27 Nov. 1950, AFA.

⁹⁶Welch, 'Labor Internationalism', p. 73; Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil*, p. 397, note 28.

Mopix [motion picture] unit in programming our films for factory showings.⁹⁷ Fisher also highlights that the whole operation came at no cost to the US embassy, which demonstrates how close and well developed was the cooperation between USIS and SESI.

Fisher photographed the screenings of the USIS film *UN Aids the Republic of Korea* at four different factories and one working men's club: Fábrica Fundação Nacional (foundry) (Supplementary Images 12–13); Cerâmica Brasileira (ceramics) (Supplementary Image 21); Indústrias Alimentícias Carlos de Brito e Cia. (food products) (Supplementary Images 14–15); Cia. Cervejaria Brahma – Filial Hanseática (brewery) (Supplementary Images 16–17); and the Clube Operário Piraquê (working men's club) (Supplementary Image 18). In a comment on the back of one of the photographs, Fisher states: 'Note various ethnic types in the groups shown here; typical of the mixture found among Brazilian factory workers.'⁹⁸ Interestingly, several of Fisher's individual and small group photos frame non-white workers, not only because they are the majority, but also because Fisher likely considered that reporting on Brazil's mixed-race workforce would get the attention of the State Department staff. UNESCO's 'Statement on Race', published in 1950, triggered a series of studies and international debates about racial issues that put Brazil at the centre of the discussion.⁹⁹ Brazilian intellectuals such as Gilberto Freyre (1900–87) – who had been directly involved in initiatives promoted by UNESCO – developed an exceptionalist narrative about Brazil's 'racial harmony',¹⁰⁰ in contrast to the racial segregation practised in the United States under the Jim Crow laws. Brazil became a 'laboratory' for social scientists interested in studying the relationship between multiracialism and modernisation.¹⁰¹ This was happening in a context in which racism, and the so called 'racial issue', became an important topic in propaganda campaigns disseminated by both the Soviet Information Bureau, which accused the United States of brutalising its Black population, and by the State Department (and later the USIA), which accused the USSR of antisemitism and ethnic cleansing in countries like Ukraine. This led USIS

⁹⁷ Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 27 Nov. 1950, AFA.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ UNESCO, *The Race Question* (Paris: UNESCO, 1950); Elizabeth Cancelli, Gustavo Mesquita and Wanderson Chaves, *Foundations, US Foreign Policy and Anti-Racism in Brazil: Pushing Racial Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2023), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Freyre's defence of Brazilian (and Portuguese) exceptionalism – and of the supposed 'soft slavery' (*escravidão suave*) practised in Brazil – is most evident in his widely translated work, *Casa-grande & Senzala* (São Paulo: Global, 2003), first published in 1933. The idea began to be challenged in the 1950s by a new wave of sociologists based at the University of São Paulo. They argued that Freyre's representation of the master–slave relationship was the projection of a Brazilian white-elite perspective, reflecting much more the ideology of Freyre and his social class than the experience of Black enslaved people. See, for example, Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes, *Relações raciais entre negros e brancos em São Paulo: Ensaio sociológico sobre as origens, as manifestações e os efeitos do preconceito de cor no Município de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Editora Anhembi, 1955); Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Octávio Ianni, *Côr e mobilidade social em Florianópolis: Aspectos das relações entre negros e brancos numa comunidade do Brasil Meridional* (São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1960); Octávio Ianni, *Escravidão e racismo* (São Paulo: Editora Hucitec, 1988); and David Lehmann, 'Gilberto Freyre: The Reassessment Continues', *Latin American Research Review*, 43: 1 (2008), pp. 208–18.

¹⁰¹ Cancelli *et al.*, *Foundations*, p. 14.

offices around the world to engage in campaigns trying to address the United States' 'reputation for racism' in the early 1950s.¹⁰²

The screenings of USIS films at factories are described by Fisher as follows:

Showings at all factories are held during the last half of lunch hour. Attendance is voluntary. Many of the workers prefer to take only a half hour for lunch, putting in the other half at their machines, thus making a little extra money. However, since SESI has started their operation, they have noticed an increasing attendance at their showings. *They say this is because more workers prefer movies to working the extra half hour.*

Each factory has one showing a week, the place for the showing being set aside by the management of the plant. The showing is always on the same day of the week, and the *workers look forward to this weekly entertainment.*¹⁰³

The role of entertainment, as we have seen in the case of rural communities, also seems key to an understanding of workers' willingness to attend these screening sessions. It is not surprising that factory workers, operating in very harsh conditions, would prefer half an hour of free screenings after lunch rather than getting back to work earlier for 'little extra money'. This willingness suggests, on the one hand, these workers' complicity with these propaganda spectacles: they agreed to take part in these screenings not as passive receptacles of US propaganda, but as active spectators of shows that included not only the films being screened, but also the performative act of showing them for free, and on the factory floor. On the other hand, it becomes clear that their willingness to engage in these political-performative acts is indissolubly connected to their strategic management of their own time and labour force in an environment in which the very notion of labour laws and protections were a recent (and incomplete) development. In this context, strategic complicity should not be confused with 'full cooperation'.

As we have seen, the framing of rural and urban workers as 'underdeveloped' subjects, vehicles of unstable subjectivities that need intervention and modernisation, is part of a metonymic process that also represents them as the embodiment of Brazil's backwardness. These images follow a formula repeated *ad nauseum*: while the spectators' gaze is directed at the screening, the camera captures their reaction. Their faces – contorted by apprehension, surprise, or laughter – reveal their emotions when exposed to the shiny projection of USIS films, as if in an epiphanic encounter with Western modernity. Fisher's photographs are structured by a visual grammar that contrasts light and dark, modernity and underdevelopment, seeing and being seen, power and subalternity. Image after image, the gaze of these workers is directed towards the screen, while the camera frames their poor and worn clothes, their calloused and dirty hands and, sometimes, their bare feet. These screenings constitute a form of visibility in which seeing becomes entangled with a structure of domination and subjection. Visuality,

¹⁰²Cull, *The Cold War*, p. 76.

¹⁰³Alan Fisher, Photobooks, 27 Nov. 1950, AFA; emphasis added.

after all, is 'a discursive organization of history', a form of visual enunciation that disciplines, normalises and organises ways of seeing and being seen.¹⁰⁴

However, if we consider, with Jacques Rancière, that 'viewing is also an action', we can start to ask how these workers could also be defying this form of visibility through what Nicholas Mirzoeff called 'the right to look', or the 'dissensus with visibility'.¹⁰⁵ This kind of visual insurgency appears surreptitiously in Fisher's photos through workers' occasional defiant gazes and gestures. For example, in one picture, some workers refuse to stare at the screen and, instead, look directly at the camera (Supplementary Image 19). In another image, the refusal to submit to the photographer's formula emerges in the form of a hand gesture, in the background and away from the eyes of the bosses and SESI instructors (Supplementary Image 20).

One of the most subversive implications of these gestures and defiant gazes is to give away the position of the photographer, breaking the 'fourth wall' of these photographs. This is because the power that frames the image must not be seen, so it can control the domain of representability effectively: it dictates what can and what cannot be seen or conceived.¹⁰⁶ By exposing the photographic act, and thus revealing the photographer's positionality, these 'undisciplined' gestures and gazes subvert the intention of these images and make the framing itself 'part of what is seen'.¹⁰⁷ By claiming their right to look, these workers remind us of their agency: they become active spectators of these propaganda campaigns, rather than their passive receivers.

Conclusion

As Latham has argued, '[m]odernization, in practice, rarely produced the kind of effects its advocates anticipated on paper'.¹⁰⁸ This is because the people at the receiving end of these policies and campaigns were pushing back, negotiating and adapting what they were exposed to in order to address their own needs and interests, and the specificities of their immediate environment. Fisher's framing of USIS screenings, and of the audience's gaze, is a form of modernising (visual) discourse. Nevertheless, his aesthetic ambition and documentary (or *concerned*) style allow space for the audience's 'undisciplined' gestures and unruly stares to be glimpsed. These unplanned visual insurgencies reveal the photographer's positionality and expose the very power relations that constitute the act of framing. This ambivalent complexity positions Alan Fisher's photography as a key source for those interested in the relationship between labour, cultural practices and transnational propaganda during the Cold War.

¹⁰⁴Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 22.

¹⁰⁵Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011 [2009]), p. 13; Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶See Judith Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25: 6 (2007), pp. 951–66; and Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979).

¹⁰⁷Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', p. 952. See also Butler's commentary on Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979): 'Bodies and Power, Revisited', *Radical Philosophy*, 114 (2002), pp. 13–19.

¹⁰⁸Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*, p. 18.

Fisher's photography also highlights an issue central to contemporary debates about propaganda (and disinformation): the extent to which propaganda is a 'co-production between communicator and audience' and 'an invitation to share a fantasy'.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Fisher's images have the potential to contribute to discussions on the legacies of the Cold War and its impact on Brazil's public debate. For example, recent scholarship on the virality of anti-Communist tropes in social media environments might benefit from considering not only domestic factors, but also the role of historical transnational propaganda campaigns and their impact on Brazil's political culture.¹¹⁰ Ultimately, looking at the events photographed by Fisher as propaganda spectacles allows us to appreciate the synchronous interplay between entertainment, active spectatorship and persuasive forms of communication.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X25101223>.

Espectáculos propagandísticos: La fotografía de Alan Fisher y el USIS (Servicio de Información de Estados Unidos) en Brasil a comienzos de la Guerra Fría

Este artículo analiza series fotográficas desconocidas producidas por el fotógrafo estadounidense Alan Fisher (1913–88) en Brasil entre 1950 y 1953. Dichas imágenes forman parte de informes visuales producidos para el Servicio de Información de Estados Unidos (USIS) con el fin de documentar la proyección de noticieros, cortometrajes y dibujos animados en fábricas y comunidades rurales de Brasil. El artículo reposiciona a Fisher como una figura clave para comprender la guerra de información estadounidense en el Brasil de mediados del siglo 20. El trabajo también teoriza estas proyecciones como eventos político-performativos y desarrolla un enfoque que da cuenta de la dimensión persuasiva (y tramposa) de estas campañas, mientras reconoce al mismo tiempo la agencia del público y su complicidad estratégica.

Palabras clave: Servicio de Información de Estados Unidos; Brasil; Guerra Fría; propaganda transnacional; fotografía; cine; guerra de información; Alan Fisher; relaciones entre Estados Unidos y Brasil

Espectáculos de propaganda: A fotografia de Alan Fisher e o USIS (Serviço de Informação dos Estados Unidos) no Brasil durante o início da Guerra Fria

Este artigo analisa amostras de séries fotográficas inexploradas produzidas pelo fotógrafo norte-americano Alan Fisher (1913–88) no Brasil entre 1950 e 1953. Essas imagens fazem parte de relatórios visuais produzidos para o Serviço de Informação dos Estados Unidos (USIS) documentando a exibição de cinejornais, curtas-metragens e desenhos animados em fábricas e comunidades rurais no Brasil. O artigo reposiciona Fisher como uma figura-chave para compreender a guerra informacional dos EUA no Brasil de meados do século 20. Esse estudo teoriza tais exibições como eventos político-perfomáticos e desenvolve uma

¹⁰⁹Baines et al. (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, p. 26.

¹¹⁰See, for example, Helton Levy and Claudia Sarmento, 'Understanding Viral Communism: A Thematic Analysis of Twitter during Brazil's 2018 Elections', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 15: 1 (2020), pp. 19–36.

abordagem que leva em conta a dimensão persuasiva (e enganosa) dessas campanhas, ao mesmo tempo em que reconhece a agência e a cumplicidade estratégica do público.

Palavras-chave: Serviço de Informação dos EUA; Brasil; Guerra Fria; propaganda transnacional; fotografia; cinema; guerra de informação; Alan Fisher; relações EUA–Brasil

Cite this article: Daniel Mandur Thomaz, 'Propaganda Spectacles: Alan Fisher's Photography and the US Information Service in Brazil during the Early Cold War', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 57: 3-4 (2025), pp. 441–469. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X25101223>