3. JORIS IVENS, THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Modesty, discretion, artistry, and intelligent observation are the virtues that inform a majority of the short films produced in the Netherlands. Joris Ivens is at once the founder and the opponent of these traditional values. Little wonder that he has remained a father figure to a younger generation of Dutch directors—Weisz, Verstappen, Verhoeven and van der Keuken.

The sobriquet, "Flying Dutchman," is peculiarly appropriate to Joris Ivens. He has made documentaries in eighteen countries and consequently he has lost touch with Holland over the years. He is honoured whenever he returns to Amsterdam, and in 1965-66 he shot *Rotterdam-Europoort,* but his place in Dutch cinema is secured by his work as a pioneer in the late Twenties and early Thirties. Although the Dutch pride themselves on being socially engaged, they recoil from extremes, and Ivens's overtly Communist stand on world issues since the Forties has disconcerted them. The real tragedy of Ivens's career is that while his political commitment has intensified to a zealous degree, his talent as a film-maker has dwindled, so that much of his recent work in Asia appears crude and naïve.

His life, however, has been devoted to film with a single-mindedness one cannot but admire. "Your set is the world," he has written, "and you have to look all around before focusing your camera on a corner of it. Even if you wished to keep aloof, life has a way of making your film a part of it."[4] All Ivens's documentaries have a rough-hewn quality, like newsreels; but they scorn the objectivity of the *genre.* "The newsreel," he emphasises, "tells us *where-when-what;* the documentary film tells us *why,* and the relationship between events."[4] Film is a means to an end for Ivens, a means of presenting truth—truth as he sees it—in a controversial situation, whether it be in Chile or Vietnam, Belgium or China. Throughout his life he has been a witness to circumstances, recording misery and dissension with an uncompromising spirit. The Ivens documentary does not merely inform and touch the spectator; it forces him into a private reaction of his own, rouses in him anger and indignation, against either the film-maker or the events he describes. One may believe that the individual is a more noble creature than the collective, and yet still respond to the passion of Ivens's approach.

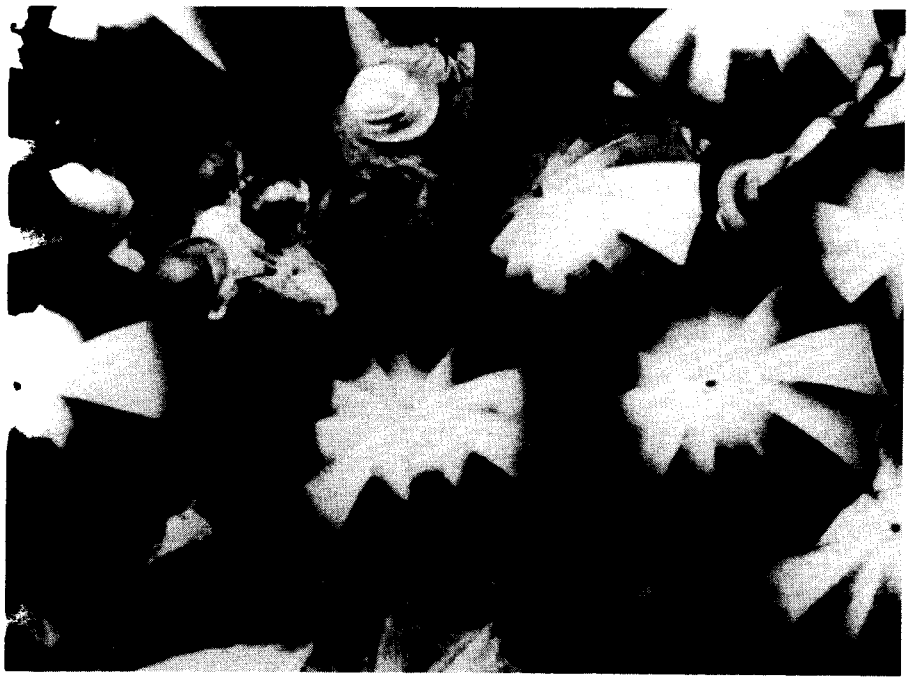
He was born on November 18, 1898, in Nijmegen. His father and grandfather were both involved in the development of photography in the Netherlands, and Ivens was already making his first film at the age of thirteen—a Red Indian adventure inspired by Karl May! He served in the First World War and after the Armistice studied economics, becoming an active figure in the trade union movement and campaigning on behalf of Dutch students for better conditions. He then travelled to Berlin where the inflated mark meant that he could attend innumerable plays and concerts for next to nothing. Eager to learn more about the mechanics of photography, he took a job in Dresden at a camera plant. Here again he was soon voicing the grievances of the workers. When he returned to Holland in 1926, he helped to establish the "Filmliga," one of the earliest of film societies and a tremendous success. He grew friendly with Hendrik Marsman, among the best Dutch poets of modern times, and with painters and sculptors who frequented the cafés of Amsterdam. German expressionism was much in vogue at the time, but Ivens, although an admirer of Ruttmann and Richter, characteristically abandoned all artificiality when he made his own *début* in 35 mm—an unedited film about drunks in a bar in the Zeedijk quarter of Amsterdam.

But it was in May 1928 that Ivens really inaugurated the Dutch cinema, with *The Bridge (De brug),* a study of movement about the railway drawbridge over the Maas river in Rotterdam. It is the smoothest of documentaries—a continuous flow of movement and a tribute to a feat of precision engineering. Ivens creates a visual symphony of sliding wheels and swinging girders, ending with a train pouring through the bridge after it has been raised and lowered to allow a ship to pass beneath. "I learned from *The Bridge,*" says Ivens, "that prolonged and creative observation is the only way to be sure of selecting, emphasising, and squeezing everything possible out of the rich reality in front of you."[4] Ivens's work at this time was effected in close collaboration with Mannus Franken, a writer involved with the Filmliga. Together they dropped all the traditional baggage of the film industry—*décor,* studio, acting—and concentrated instead on the evolution of a realistic documentary style.

Rain (*Regen,* 1929), perhaps Ivens's most celebrated piece, was based on a screenplay by Franken,* and reminded Ivens of the lines by Verlaine:

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville.

*"Ivens, despairing because of the continual oily autumnal rains—those thick, sober, well-fed rains of Holland—came to Paris and complained to his friend . . . of nature's perversity and his own dire condition. 'Well,' said Franken, 'why don't you film the rain?' " (Harry Alan Potamkin, in *The Compound Cinema,* New York, Teachers College Press, 1977).



A famous shot from Ivens's RAIN

For four months the minuscule production team photographed shower after shower in order to achieve the desired *look* of wetness. "The rain itself was a moody actress who had to be humoured and who refused anything but natural make-up."[4]

Rain is a dazzling photographic exercise, starting with views of the sunny streets and then noting the wind-troubled canopies above the shops, and the first scattered drops of rain in the canals. As the shower intensifies, the streets themselves look like canals. Everywhere there are rivulets of water, drops that coalesce along the tumbled roofs. The pace of pedestrians caught in the rain increases—at first a mass of confused umbrellas crouching together, then a series of bustling figures hurrying home along the pavements. Thus the basic pattern of an Ivens film is discernible. Movement within the frame is closely tied to the rhythm of the editing; camera movements are not so important. The structure used in *Rain*—situation, incident, return to *status quo ante*—has been followed by Dutch film-makers many times since.

In 1929, Ivens recruited John Fernhout as one of his assistants. Fernhout (later known as Ferno) was only fourteen when he was involved with the production of *Breakers (Branding),* and later he photographed most of Ivens's important work in the Thirties before branching out successfully as a director himself (see Chapter Five).

Breakers tells of an unemployed fisherman who pawns his watch in order to buy a brooch for his *fiancée*. The pawnbroker is a villain like all pawnbrokers, of coûrse, and the youth is tempted to murder him. At the uncertain end, he sails out to sea and the water continues to break and foam over the limitless shore. Ivens and his crew lived in a rented house at Katwijk, a fishing village on the Dutch coast, and constructed an elaborate rubber sack with a glass front that fitted over the camera and Ivens's head and shoulders, so that he could film the sea actually breaking over and around him. The kinetic energy of these shots gives a distinctive lilt and intensity to the film. There is something ineffably touching, too, in the way the sand slides and flows beneath the hands of the young lovers in the dunes. Ironically, *Breakers* is impaired by its awkward performances. Ivens was clearly influenced by the Soviet films of the Twenties, with their large close-ups and heavy, scowling faces.

When Pudovkin was in Amsterdam for a lecture at the Filmliga, he invited Ivens to visit the U.S.S.R., and in December 1929, the Dutchman arrived in Moscow and was at once allowed to stay in Eisenstein's apartment. He travelled to Leningrad, where he met Kozintsev and Trauberg, and on to Kiev, the home of Alexander Dovzhenko, whose *Earth* impressed Ivens deeply. Two years later, he was to return to the Soviet Union and make *Song of Heroes*, a celebration of the burgeoning steel plant at Magnitogorsk.

In 1930, Ivens embarked on the first of his great films about land reclamation. He was the most important chronicler of the Dutch campaign against the sea, a theme that runs like an unbroken thread through Dutch life and culture. It is difficult for the foreigner to grasp the significance of the dikes and windmills to the Dutch. For them, they symbolise not a decorative and picturesque mode of life, but a means of survival, tokens of progress and fortitude. In the words of the poet Roland Holst,

> *"Sometimes I half imagine that the sea*
> *Since powerful it seems, my whole life long will be*
> *The tempestuous reality,*
> *With which I can withstand the world,*
> *Come good, come ill."*
>
> (translated by James Brockway)

Ivens was fascinated by this indigenous source of inspiration. He set out to show how man continually adapts to his environment and to nature's demands. *New Earth* (*Nieuwe gronden*, 1934) is concerned with the construction of an artificial inland sea and the closing of the great barrier dike across the north of the Zuiderzee. This is recorded by Ivens and his three cameras with an ecstatic burst of montage reminiscent of Eisenstein's triumphant sequences at the end of

The procession of workers from NEW EARTH

Battleship Potemkin. Ivens regards the 500 feet (about 125 shots) of this dam-closing sequence as the most complex and successfully dramatic editing he has ever done. Hanns Eisler's music is wedged humorously against the images, giving an almost choreographic effect to the shots of men tossing stones and carrying pipes in unison.

The Thirties were a crucial period in Ivens's development. He gradually shuffled off the aesthetic style that had marked *The Bridge, Rain* and *Breakers,* in favour of a sharper, more purposeful form of cinema. For Ivens, it is the organisation of shots, of "raw material," that is vital if the truth is to be presented in a dynamic, provocative way. The most bitter part of *New Earth* is the last reel, when one sees the harvest, grown on hard-won land, being thrown back into the sea because of the depression of 1930.

Borinage (1933), made in Belgium, brings into focus the struggle between the miners at Borinage and the authorities, and Ivens's grave, objective camera conveys the workers' grim determination to prevail as they trudge through the streets on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Karl Marx's death. Shots of families camping in tiny rooms, or scraping worthless coal from the tips in an attempt to keep warm, still carry the feel of a crisis, even if they were staged and fabricated by Ivens to suit his cause. "Every sequence should say I ACCUSE," maintains Ivens, "accusing the social system which caused such misery and hardship . . . Our aim was to prevent agreeable photographic effects distracting the audience from the unpleasant truths we were

showing."[4] One is reminded strongly of Barbara Kopple and her documentary on the Kentucky miners' strike of 1973, in *Harlan County U.S.A.*

Spanish Earth, filmed at the height of the Civil War in 1937, is given immense weight by Ernest Hemingway's commentary. His impassioned description of this battle between the "will of the military" and the "will of the people" is an ideal counterpoint to the images—images seized with courage and sensitivity from the most dangerous quarters of the war by Ivens and Fernhout. The predominant impression is of a pastoral people coming to terms with fighting: tanks are incongruous in the placid fields; after work the peasants drill together. But the intermittent massacres bring home the more nightmarish aspects of the Civil War: doomed figures dashing across the street as shells scream down on a summer's afternoon. Though its visuals comprise an ugly mosaic of conflict and destruction, *Spanish Earth* is still an idealistic film, expressing an unshakable faith in "the clenched fists of republican Spain."

Ivens then visited China, where he made *The 400 Million,* dealing with the Chinese response to the Japanese invasion, recording the panic of dispossessed men, women and children as they flee beleaguered cities. (The camera Ivens gave to the Chinese when he departed now rests in a Peking museum.) Next, the U.S.A., where he undertook *The Power and the Land* for the U.S. Film Service; and

Street scene from SPANISH EARTH

Canada, where at the invitation of John Grierson he shot *Action Stations,* about the Canadian naval effort in the war. Although he discussed projects with Wellman and Pozner, Ivens did not make a feature film during his stay in America, and in 1945 he went to Australia and assembled *Indonesia Calling.* The Indonesians were still fighting for their independence at this stage, for the Dutch wanted to return, according to the commentary, to their "treasure islands." The film centres on the Australian dockers' and sailors' refusal to handle Dutch ships that were intended "to break the back of the young republic," and there are effective moments when, for example, a picket vessel harangues a military ship with an interpreter translating urgently through a megaphone and the soldiers booing in return.

This powerful left-wing propaganda ingratiated Ivens with the Communist bloc, just as it mortified the Dutch authorities, who had already been shocked when Ivens resigned as Film Commissioner for the Netherlands East Indies government in protest against the "undemocratic" attitude of his employers. He was invited to Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the young German Democratic Republic. Some of Ivens's best postwar films, like *The Song of the Rivers* (*Lied der Ströme,* 1954), have been made in Eastern Europe, although *La Seine a rencontré Paris* strongly revives the romantic vision of his youth, with a commentary by Jacques Prévert that imparts a lyrical flow to the journey by barge up the Seine. *Song of the Rivers,* by contrast, brings together workers from various countries, stressing their mutual desire to combat oppression, and using six of the world's principal rivers as a unifying *motif.*

Ivens has worked ceaselessly these past years. In Italy he shot a television feature about the ugly disparities in the national economy (the film was, accordingly, heavily cut); in Cuba, where he gave lessons at the national film institute (ICAIC), he was responsible for two shorts about the independence campaign; and in Chile he collaborated with Chris Marker on *A Valparaiso,* one of his finest documentaries. Marker's words, like Hemingway's in *Spanish Earth,* bring a dignity and a muted anguish to the picture of a city cramped almost to death against the hills, a city once a major port of call—before the Panama Canal was opened.

Ivens returned to the Netherlands in 1965 to shoot his first film there for several years—*Rotterdam-Europoort.* It was a sympathetic glance, in colour, at the people who make possible the prestige of the city of Rotterdam, but it tried to assimilate too many individual elements (an amateur performance of "The Flying Dutchman," burning buildings during the war) for it to have the satisfying cadence of Ivens's vintage films. It is characteristic of his involvement in man's struggles against invasion that in the past decade he has spent much time in South-East Asia, producing such films as *The Threatening Sky* (*Le 17ème parallèle,* 1968), a trenchant account of the Vietnamese

response and resistance to American bombing, and *Le peuple et ses fusils* (1969) about the conflict in Laos. He contributed a segment to the portmanteau production, *Loin du Viêtnam* (1967), in which he extols the civil defence that Hanoi marshalled so successfully against American bombing. Again, the argument is simplistic and one-sided, but the report has a pictorial naturalism worthy of the best Ivens. Would he, one wonders, ever make—or be permitted to make—a film about present day Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and the agony of those forced into the countryside or held in detention centres for "re-education"?

Ivens has during the Seventies completed an enormous fresco of contemporary China, under the title *How Yukong Moved the Mountains.* Its twelve episodes run to more than eleven hours, and they have been screened widely on television. A typical section describes the daily routine and fledgling technology of the oilfields in the northern province of Taking. The underlying theme of the whole film is the Cultural Revolution and its impact on life in China. As always in Ivens, the emphasis is on people rather than places; the vast cities and plains of China are insignificant by comparison with shopkeepers, technicians, teachers, and peasants. Ivens admits that when he strolled round Dutch museums in his youth, "Nature meant little more than a setting for human activity. Even Brueghel's landscapes were to me just backgrounds for the living, moving, dancing people in the foreground."[4] One must praise Ivens's courage in switching his allegiance from an orthodox admiration for Soviet society to an open-minded appreciation of Chinese life, a pattern of existence much frowned upon by Moscow. But he had been friendly for years with prominent figures such as Chou-en-lai, and had been much impressed by the country when he made *The 400 Million* in 1938. It was Chou who suggested in 1971 that Ivens and Marcelle Loridan bring their cameras to China again, to confront a country that had moved from feudalism to a communistic democracy in less than a generation. Perhaps this perennially young-in-spirit *cinéaste* is drawn instinctively to the early phase in a people's fight for liberation; had he been in Russia sixty years ago, he would have been using film to help the Bolshevik Revolution, so it is only natural that today, in his declining years, he should gravitate towards China, where time has not yet brought corruption and cynicism in its train.