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# “Men Cannot Act in Front of the Camera in the Presence of Death”

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## JORIS IVENS’ *THE SPANISH EARTH*

by Thomas Waugh

*The first installment of this article, which focussed on the political and artistic background to the production of Joris Ivens’ Spanish Earth, appeared in our Vol. XII, No. 2 issue.*

As soon as it became apparent that the Franco rebellion posed a serious threat, Ivens assembled the group of leftist artists and intellectuals who were to become the producing body for a Spanish film. Their idea was to bolster American support for the Republican cause by means of a short, quickly made compilation of newsreel material. This would explain the issues to the American public and counter the already skillful Franquist propaganda. They called themselves Contemporary Historians, Inc., and had as their spokespeople the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Archibald MacLeish and the novelist John Dos Passos, both well-known fellow-travelers. Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker were the other pillars of the group, with Hellman’s Broadway producer, Herman Shumlin, recruited to act as the film’s producer. Helen Van Dongen was to put together the film. It soon became clear, however, that not enough good footage was available and that even the shots at hand were of limited use since they were taken from the Franco side—

burning churches and the like—as well as expensive and difficult to pry out of the notoriously reactionary newsreel companies. The group then decided to finish the project as quickly and cheaply as possible, which Van Dongen did using a Dos Passos commentary and relying on Soviet footage of the front. This feature-length work, called *Spain in Flames*, was hurriedly released in February 1937. Meanwhile, the producers decided to put most of their hopes on a film of greater scope to be shot from scratch on Spanish soil, personally underwriting a budget of \$18,000. Ivens would direct.

As the autumn progressed, the need for the film became more and more urgent: the left press began denouncing the German and Italian interventions and the Western democracies began nervously discussing neutrality. By the time Ivens arrived in Paris in the first bitter January of the war, a tentative scenario in his pocket, he had already been preceded by the first of the International Brigades, and by a growing stream of Western artists, intellectuals, and activists, including filmmakers from the Soviet Union and England.

In Valencia, suddenly the new Republican capital because of the presumed imminence of the fall of Madrid, Ivens and John Ferno, his cinematographer from the Dutch days,



joined up with Dos Passos and got right to work. They soon concluded, however, that their script was unworkable in the worsening situation. Drafted by Ivens together with Hellman and MacLeish, it emphasized the background to the war and a step by step chronology of the Spanish revolution, calling for considerable dramatization. The Republicans they consulted urged them instead to head straight for Madrid to find their subject in the action on the front line. As the film's commentary would later make clear, "Men cannot act in front of the camera in the presence of death."

The abandoned script merits a brief look, however, as an indicator of where American radical documentarists saw themselves heading in 1936. Based largely on dramatized narrative and semi-fictional characterization, its only American precursors would have been the films of Flaherty, some scattered Film and Photo League shorts, and Paul Strand's anomalous Mexican *Redes*, completed but not yet released at this point. The more likely model was the Soviet Socialist Realist semi-documentary epic, of which Ivens' own *Komsomol* (1932) was an important prototype.

The *Spanish Earth* script followed the chronology of a village's political growth over a period of six or seven years, from the fall of the monarchy until the fictional retaking of the village from Franquist forces during the present conflict. A single peasant family was to be featured, particularly their young son whose evolution would be emblematic of the Spanish peasantry's maturation during those

years. The village would be a diagrammatic cross-section of Spanish society as a whole, and various melodramatic or allegorical touches would highlight the various social forces in play—there were to be representative fascists, militarists, landowners, clergy, intelligentsia, even German interventionists and the ex-king! Ivens was clearly intending to expand his first experiments along these lines in *Komsomol* and *Borinage* (where striking miners had reenacted their clashes with police and bailiffs, the latter impersonated by strikers in theatrical costumes). The script called for some elements of newsreel reportage to be worked in as well.

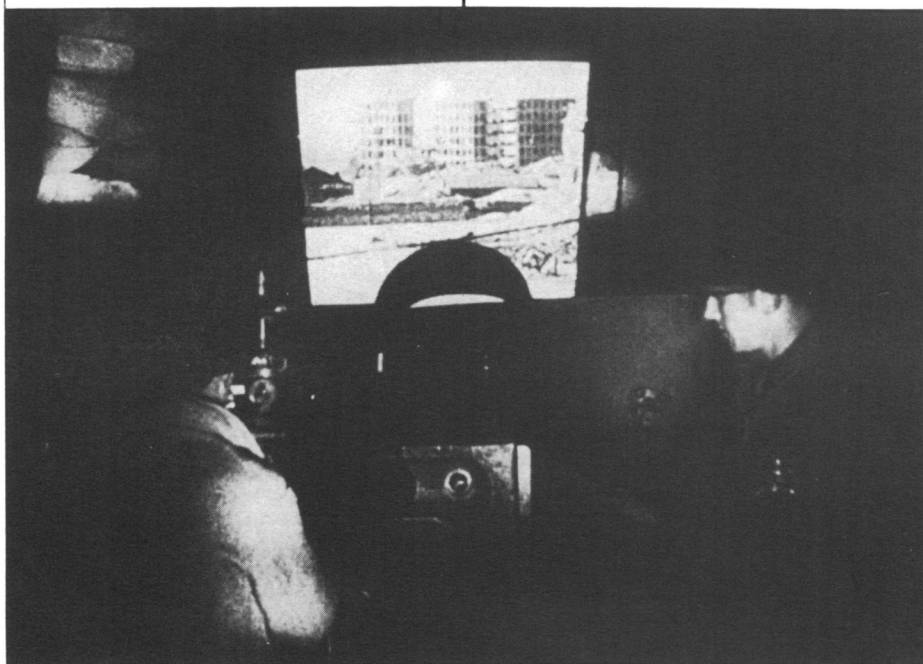
The final version of *Spanish Earth* turned out to be much more complex formally than the original outline called for, an improvised hybrid of many filmic modes, but certain elements of the outline remained. The most important of these was the notion of a village as a microcosm of the Spanish revolution. The chosen village, Fuenteduenas, was ideal in this and every other respect. Its location on the Madrid-Valencia lifeline was symbolically apt, a link between village revolution and war effort. It was also visually stunning, set near the Tagus River amid a rolling landscape, and accessible to Madrid. Politically, too, the village was ideal: the community had reclaimed a former hunting preserve of aristocrats, now fled, and had begun irrigating their new land. The filmmakers could thus keep their original theme of agrarian reform and hints of the original dramatic conflict between landowners and peasantry.

As for the original cloak-and-dagger plot about the young villager, Ivens

and his collaborators attempted to telescope it into a simple narrative idea involving Julian, a peasant who has joined the Republican army. Even this scaled-down role was only partly realized since Julian disappeared in the frontline confusion after his village sequences had been filmed.

Julian, an undistinctive-looking young peasant, appeared in only four scenes of the final film, stretched out by the editor to a maximum: a brief moment on the Madrid front where he is seen writing a letter home, the text provided in an insert and read by the commentator; a scene where he is seen hitching a ride back home on leave to Fuenteduenas, with a flashback reminder of the letter; next, his reunion first with his mother and then with his whole family; and finally, a sequence where he drills the village boys in an open space. The footage was insufficient even for these scenes, so that the commentator must ensure our recognition of Julian by repeating his name and fleshing out the details of the narrative. The reunion scene would be the biggest challenge to editor Van Dongen. She was to improvise, using closeups of villagers apparently shot for other uses, and ingeniously fabricate a fictional miniscene from unrelated material, where Julian's small brother runs to fetch their father from the fields upon his arrival. The family thus shown in this sentimental but effective scene would be largely synthetic. After Julian's disappearance, a symbolic close-up of an anonymous soldier was taken for the defiant finale of the film.

But this forced postponement of Ivens' dream of "personalization" did not stand in the way of other efforts to heighten the personal quality of the film. At every point in *Spanish Earth*, the filmmakers would intervene in the post-production to make individual figures come alive dramatically: through the commentary, as when a briefly seen Republican officer is identified by name and then laconically eulogized when it is disclosed that he was killed after the filming; or through complex editing procedures, as when a miniature story of two boys killed in the bombing of Madrid is chillingly wrought out of noncontinuous shots and a synthetic flash-frame detonation; or through lingering close-ups of anonymous bystanders and onlookers, some of whom are even dramatized through first-person commentary. Several years later, Ivens would conclude that such vignettes, "hasty and attempted identities now and then walking through a documentary," had fallen short of his goal of continuous "personalization" and that his next project on the Sino-



Gunners targeting a fascist holdout on the outskirts of Madrid in *Spanish Earth*.



Japanese front, *The Four Hundred Million*, had been no less frustrating. It would not be until Ivens' third American film, *The Power and the Land* (1940), that the relative luxury of peacetime filmmaking would allow him to experiment with fixed characters developed consistently throughout an entire film, in this case, a wholesome American farm family.

“Personalization” was not the only aspect of the Fuenteduena shooting that imitated Hollywood narrative. Using their heavy tripod-based DeBrie camera, Ivens and Ferno developed a kind of documentary “*mise-en-scène*,” a collaborative shooting style staging “real” actors in “real” settings. Eventually constituting about two-fifths of the film, Ivens’ *mise-en-scène* was an even more aggressive intervention in the events being filmed than Flaherty’s collaboration with his subjects. Ivens matter-of-factly used the vocabulary of studio filmmaking such as “retake” and “covering shot”; on location, he set up shot-countershot constructions with his peasant subjects that aimed at the spatio-temporal continuity of studio fiction of the period, complete with complementary angles of a single action and insert close-ups of detail. This approach enabled not only a clear chronological summary of the Fuenteduena irrigation work as it progressed before the camera, Ivens’ emblem of the Spanish revolution, but also, the balanced and lyrical, even romantic, framings and movements that idealized the workers and their relationship to the Spanish earth.

Ivens was of course not alone in “setting up” his subjects: the other major documentarists of the period, from Basil Wright to Pare Lorentz, all used variations of the same method. It is this element that looks most dated to our *cinéma-vérité*-trained eyes. For Richard Leacock, narrative *mise-en-scène* led to the “dark ages of the documentary” and, for modernist critics like Vlada Petric, *mise-en-scène* meant the “[abandonment of] the concept of film as a genuine visual art which draws its content from those kinesthetic qualities only cinema can bring to life. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Ivens, however, did not often have to answer to such ahistoric criticism at the time. The interventionist orthodoxy of the late Thirties was no less universal than the

<sup>1</sup> Leacock, cited by Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930–1942* (UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 282; Petric, *Soviet Revolutionary Films in America (1926–35)*, dissertation NYU 1973, pp. 460–62.



Loyalist soldiers survey a battlefield in *Spanish Earth*.

“*vérité*” orthodoxy is today. Filmmakers and critics of the late Thirties agreed on the need for a dramatization of the factual, its “vivification,” as some put it. This trend was partly in reaction to the impersonality of the newsreels and the other journalistic media. “Was I making a film or just newsreel shots?”, Ivens would ask of *Spanish Earth*. Truth was not a function of phenomenological scruple but of political principle. Truth was not to be found on the surface of reality, but in deeper social, economic, and historical structures. The esthetic of naturalist spontaneity in film was to be distrusted as much as “spontaneism” in the arena of political strategy. The generation of filmmakers who developed *mise-en-scène* as a documentary mode believed, like their cousins the Socialist Realists, that their work had the vocation not only to reflect the world but also to act upon it, to change it. This was true even for liberals and social democrats like Lorentz and Grierson who did not subscribe to Marxist ideals. Ivens’ primary question was not whether he had shown the “truth” but whether “the truth has been made convincing enough to make people want to change or emulate the situation shown to them on the screen.”

This is not to say that documentary *mise-en-scène* would have appeared to Thirties spectators in the same way as fictional narrative cinema. An overwhelming network of “documentary” codes prevented it from doing so, from nonsynchronous sound, to nonmade-up faces, to specific marketing approaches, to the replacement of “psychological” typing by “social” typ-

ing.

*Mise-en-scène*, however, a luxury affordable in the calm of Fuenteduena, was rarely possible on the front lines. In Madrid, the filmmakers attached themselves to the communist-affiliated Fifth Regiment in the Casa de Velasquez. Here they shot the siege of the city from the point of view of both its defenders in the front line suburbs and the air raid shelters within the city itself. By the time of the key battle of Brihuega (Guadalajara) in March, Ernest Hemingway, a recent convert to the Republican cause, had replaced Dos Passos as the production’s guide and literary mentor. At Brihuega, buoyed by an important contingent of the International Brigades, the Republicans won a major victory against a twelve-to-one firepower disadvantage and prevented the besieged capital from being cut off. The battle’s additional political significance was the incontrovertible proof it offered that organized Italian units were taking part—Italian casualties and their letters home are shown in a particularly moving scene of *Spanish Earth* (a scene that would lead to a fruitless screening at the League of Nations). Brihuega features prominently in the last half of the final version of Ivens’ film. The battle material, from both Madrid and Brihuega, as well as from one other village that the filmmakers shot under bombardment, has a style whose spontaneity is diametrically opposite to the orderly, lyrical *mise-en-scène* of Fuenteduena.

The “spontaneous” mode, relying primarily on the crew’s two small hand-cameras, is notable for the unrehearsed flexibility and mobility re-



quired to cover the soldiers and civilian victims who could not "act before the camera." This mode, as Ivens had not foreseen while scriptwriting in New York, would make up more than half of the finished film. With this style, the camera operator, rather than rearranging an event in front of the lens, follows it spontaneously—the storming of a building, a run for cover during an air raid, the evacuation of children, panic in the streets of the bombed-out village. The principles of spatio-temporal continuity were left for the editor to find in the cans: it was too dangerous for the operator to think about retakes and reverse shots. "Spontaneous" shooting provided spectators with its own distinctive documentary codes, distinct from those of *mise-en-scène* material often present, as in *Spanish Earth*, in the same film or even the same sequence: unmotivated and random detail of behavior or atmosphere, the flouting of taboos on out of focus material, looking at the camera, illegibility, and so on. The mystique of "life-caught-unawares" was still an essential element of the documentary sensibility despite the universal acceptance of *mise-en-scène*. Because of this mystique, "spontaneous" elements often had the greatest impact on spectators, at least on reviewers: the reviews of the day never failed to mention a woman seen wiping her eye amid the rubble of her village. The great sensitivity of "spontaneous" material such as this in *Spanish Earth* has confirmed Ivens' reputation as a major inheritor of Vertov and a precursor of *cinéma-vérité*.

It was in Madrid also that Ivens shot some material in a third cinematic mode that constitutes only a fraction

of the finished film but deserves brief mention nonetheless. These static, controlled images of public events, taken with a heavy, stationary camera, I call the "newsreel" mode because its repertory is identical to that of the newsreel companies of the period—ceremonious long shots of files of dignitaries, cheering crowds, military parades, or beauty contests. Though Ivens and other leftists and liberals usually avoided "newsreel" shooting as much out of distaste for clichés and superficiality as from any ideological scruple, the opportunity to use a borrowed newsreel soundtrack to record a People's Army rally was one Ivens could not refuse. Newsreel-style cinematography was the only means by which Thirties documentaries could attempt synchronous sound on location—twenty years would pass before technology would catch up, in the television age, with the aspiration to hear as well as to see "life-caught-unawares." In any case, the rally scene of *Spanish Earth* featured the stirring oratory of La Pasionaria and other Republican leaders (some dubbed in New York because of technical problems), and, for this reason, as well as for its skillful editorial compression, would avoid the pitfalls of the mode. It was up to Riefenstahl and the Nazis to elevate to a new art form the "newsreel" clichés of orators intercut with cheering crowds; the only phase of Ivens' career to depend on this mode was his Cold War exile in East Germany where he presided over several official rally films of the fading Stalin era.

*Spanish Earth*, then, unexpectedly became a cinematic hybrid in the uncontrollable laboratory of war and revolution. In this, as a compendium of different filmic modes, it was typical of

most documentaries of the late Thirties. Other national traditions were varying the hybrid model according to local factors. Grierson's British directors tended to use *mise-en-scène* more than Ivens, even resorting to studio work on occasion; Cartier-Bresson's cinematography for Frontier Films' second Spanish project, *Fight for Life* (1938), was more "spontaneous" than any other comparable film. The general trend, however, was towards greater and greater use of *mise-en-scène*. In this respect, Ivens' evolution paralleled the work of almost every documentarist of the period. Wherever circumstances and resources permitted—not always the case as buildup towards world war continued—documentarists almost unanimously built up the *mise-en-scène* components of their hybrid works, experimenting more and more with characterization, narrative vocabulary, and even scripting. Writers became standard crew members, not only for commentaries, but also to provide plots, continuity, and dialogue. During the Forties, this mode became the basic component of most documentary, rivalled only by the compilation mode for which the war had created a special market, and the dominance of "*mise-en-scène*" would continue right up until the explosion of *cinéma-vérité* in the late Fifties.

Meanwhile Helen Van Dongen had begun assembling the consignments of rushes in New York as they arrived from Spain, wiring the filmmakers whenever she thought that a given topic was now well covered or that another was weak. When the shooting wound up in May, she began in earnest, shaping sequences shot according to each of the three modes according to the methods of narrative continuity that she had perfected in her recent Hollywood apprenticeship. Individual sequences began emerging—the Fuenteduena irrigation project, civilians under bombardment, the Madrid and Brihuega fronts—each built strictly with the sequential and temporal logic of short fictional units. Obviously, the "spontaneous" rushes presented the most challenge since they had not been shot "for the editor." But she responded with ingenuity, building up to each split-second bomb impact with systematic precision and then having the clearing smoke reveal the rubble and the panic, or following each Republican artillery shot with an image denoting an on-target hit. Part of her skill was in picking out visual motifs to assure a narrative fluidity; images of children in a bombed-out street, for example, or a repeated



The spontaneous mode: village women fleeing aerial bombardment in *Spanish Earth*.



"In countering images of victimization with images of resistance and revolution, *Spanish Earth* articulates a worldview that sees people as agents of history, not its casualties. The final word is given not to the airborne mercenaries and their bombs, but to the people rooted in the central symbol of the film, the earth."

glimpse of an ambulance or an artillery shell, would underline an implied continuity. Sometimes a minor but identifiable bystander would function as a hinge for a continuity: her choice to cut at the point when a background figure in the People's Army rally blows his nose has drawn the admiration of at least one critic. Seldom before had the principles of fictional narrative editing been so skillfully and unobtrusively adapted for the purposes of non-fiction. The abandonment of the modernist-derived editing strategies of the young Ivens in his avant-garde days—for example, unsettling contrasts in scale, angle, and movement direction, or ironic or dialectical idea-cutting, often Soviet-inspired—was a price that Ivens and Van Dongen were willing to pay to achieve the Popular Front goal of speaking the narrative film language of the people.

Within the emerging film as a whole, Van Dongen alternated short scenes of the military struggle and the social revolution, interweaving the themes of the combat in Madrid and Brihuega with the progress of the Fuenteduena irrigators. Two stunning scenes depicting the bombardment of civilians were placed at a climactic point about two-thirds of the way through the fifty-two minute film, so that the concluding movement, the victorious battle interpolated with the completion of the irrigation system, seems like a defiant riposte of the people against their oppressors. A coda alternates single shots of water rushing through the new irrigation trough and images of a lone rifleman firing, so that the two themes, defense and revolution, are summarized and fused, two dimensions of a single struggle.

The alternating pattern of civilian and military struggles was therefore not just an effective editing device but also a crucial ideological statement. In countering images of victimization with images of resistance and revolution, *Spanish Earth* articulates a worldview that sees people as agents of history, not its casualties. The final word is given not to the airborne mercenaries and their bombs, but to the

people rooted in the central symbol of the film, the earth. In alternating the military resistance with the civilian struggle, *Spanish Earth* equates them, merges them into the ideological concept of the people's war. Ivens would return again and again to this visual and ideological construct as he continued to chronicle the people's struggles of our era, from China and the Soviet Union to Cuba and Vietnam, each time echoing the *Spanish Earth* equation of peasants in their fields and soldiers on the frontlines, of hoes and guns.



Ivens and Van Dongen brought to the soundtrack of *Spanish Earth* the same embrace of popular narrative film language as was evident in the shooting and editing, and the same creative resourcefulness in integrating it to their political task. The modernist virtuosity and clamorous experimentation of Ivens' early sound documentaries yielded to the subdued purposefulness of the Popular Front. The sound effects were innovative to the extent that Van Dongen experimented with more convincing laboratory synthesis (on-location sound effects were still primitive) and varied the newsreel cliché of wall-to-wall noise with moments of well-

chosen silence and subtle transitions. The sound effects functioned essentially as support for the narrative thrust of the film, however, heightening the especially powerful scenes such as the bombardment episodes, injecting dramatic and informational energy into scenes that were less interesting visually, such as the long shot Brihuega ones, and in general providing "realistic" background texture to each of the film's narrative lines.

Continuing the Popular Front practice of lining up prestigious contributors, Ivens recruited two of the best-known East Coast composers to handle the music: Marc Blitzstein, the in-house composer of the New York left, and Virgil Thomson, who had been widely acclaimed for his brilliant folk score for *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Blitzstein and Thomson, pressed by the filmmakers' tight schedule, compiled Spanish folk music, both instrumental and choral, for the score. This choice reflected not only their haste but also the influence of the documentary movement on musical taste of the late Thirties and the impact of *Plow*. The filmmakers fit the music to the images with discretion and sensitivity, with expressive pauses that contrast sharply with the "wall-to-wall" tendencies of the period, even of "prestige" films like *Triumph of the Will* and *Man of Aran*. The tedious over-synchronization that is also noticeable in the same two films was likewise avoided, with general atmospheric matching being the guiding principle instead: sprightly dance rhythms accompany the villagers at work in the field and a soft dirge-like choral piece follows the village bombardment with just the right understated, elegiac touch.

It was the commentary, however, that attracted more attention than any of the other soundtracks, and not only because of its star author. Hemingway's text is a high point in the benighted history of an art form of dubious legitimacy, the documentary commentary, and unusually prophetic in its anticipation of future develop-



**The newsreel mode: La Pasionaria addresses a People's Army rally in *Spanish Earth*.**



ments in documentary sound. What was most striking to contemporary spectators was its personal quality. Ivens, Van Dongen, and Hellman made a last-minute decision to replace Orson Welles' slick reading with a less professional recording by Hemingway himself. This voice, with its frank, low-key roughness, added to the text's aura of personal involvement. It was a striking contrast to the oily, authoritarian voice-of-God for which *The March of Time* was famous and which most documentaries imitated. Instead of an anonymous voice, the commentator became a vivid character on his own terms, a subjective witness of the events of the film, a participant. Though this function of the narrator was already common in Popular Front print journalism, Hemingway's contribution to *Spanish Earth* set off a trend in documentary film that would last throughout World War II, with filmmakers as different as Flaherty, John Huston, and Humphrey Jennings benefiting from his example, an effective substitute for the still impossible ideal of using sound to make subjects come alive on location.

Hemingway's text had other innovative aspects, too—its obliqueness, its variations in tone, its detail and immediacy, its multiplicity of postures towards the spectator, its ability to be at times dramatic and at times lyrical or reflective without being overbearing. Most remarkable of all, perhaps, was its restraint. Ivens and Hemingway concentrated on "let[ting] the film speak for itself," on avoiding words that would duplicate the image-continuity, on providing "sharp little guiding arrows" of text, "springboards," often at the beginning of a scene, to invite the audience's involvement. The commentary's role as information and exposition was secondary. Not surprisingly, it is in the strongly narrative *mise-en-scène* passages set in Fuenteduena that the commentary intervenes least, and in the extreme long shot accounts of artillery and infantry combat where it is, of necessity, most present, and, arguably, most effective. Hemingway's text was ultimately laid over only one-fifth of the image track. This was an all-time record for conciseness in the classical documentary (during the war, Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* films would sometimes approach four-fifths, as did regularly the Canadian National Film Board films), but Ivens' record was often rivaled by some of his more visually oriented contemporary documentarists.

A careful look at the commentary in *Spanish Earth*, as well as in most films by the "art" documentarists of the day, undermines a prevailing cur-

rent myth of how sound operated in the classical documentary. This myth, emanating mostly from *Screen* magazine, depicts the classical sound documentary as an "illustrated lecture," a film dominated by a direct address commentary to which images played a mere supporting role.<sup>2</sup> Trained within the silent avant-garde cinema, Ivens and Van Dongen had nothing but contempt for this "illustration" approach, and usually succeeded in avoiding it, commissioning commentaries only after an autonomous image-continuity had been established and then reducing them ferociously. Most of the British directors in the Grierson stable did the same, as did Flaherty, Lorentz, and Vertov. Jennings and Riefenstahl did away with the commentary almost completely. Van Dongen had her own simple test of silencing the soundtrack to test the visual sufficiency of a given film. *Spanish Earth* must be seen as a highlight of a whole tradition of experiments in sound-image structures that fought against the voice-of-God tedium of the newsreels (and the later wartime compilation films) in search of creative alternatives for the still new audiovisual art form. Our sense of documentary history must be revised to accommodate this tradition, just as the dream factory/assembly line model of Hollywood history has long since been shaped to account for the Capras and the Fords.

Hemingway's commentary was spoken live at a June preview of *Spanish Earth*, in silent rough cut, at the Second National Congress of American Writers, a grouping of leftist and liberal writers. Hemingway declared to the assembly that "Spain is the first real battlefield in an evil and international conflict that is certain to recur elsewhere," something presumably most of those present already knew. In order to ensure that the film would reach those who did not already know this, a massive publicity campaign got underway. In July, a White House preview led to a plug in Eleanor Roosevelt's column, the impossible dream of all Popular Front filmmakers. Immediately thereafter, Ivens and Hemingway arrived in Los Angeles for huge sell out premieres and private fund raising screenings within Hollywood's progressive circles, where \$20,000 was collected for Republican medical relief.

<sup>2</sup>This incomplete and misleading description of the classical sound documentary can be found in such otherwise groundbreaking articles on documentary as Bill Nichols' "Documentary Theory and Practice" (*Screen*, Vol. 17, No. 4) and Annette Kuhn's "Desert Victory and the People's War" (*Screen*, Vol. 22, No. 2).

The glitter and the publicity photos with Joan Crawford were not for the sake of vanity. The West Coast connections were deemed essential to the filmmakers' hopes for commercial distribution. Political documentaries had never received distribution by the "majors" up to this point, but the overwhelming feeling was that a breakthrough was imminent, thanks to Lorentz's obstinate and successful campaign the previous year to distribute *Plow* through independent exhibitors. But the fanfare was deceptive. *Variety* summed up Ivens' predicament:

*This can make money where any picture can make money but it won't make it there. It won't make it there because it won't get in there. It will have to depend as it did here in its world premiere, on lecture halls which are wired for sound and can gross enough in one performance to justify a week's buildup.*

Nothing is new under the sun. The filmmakers resigned themselves to the traditional marginalized distribution that political, documentary, and Soviet films had always relied on. The film opened August 20th at the 55th Street Playhouse. While this art theater was one level above the usual Soviet purgatory downtown, Ivens' disappointment was profound, and record-breaking capacity crowds scarcely consoled him. The film's small leftist distributor, Garrison Films, tried to repeat *Plow*'s success. The ads played up the Hemingway name so much that *Spanish Earth* was often called a Hemingway film, a prestige-oriented tactic that was buoyed by the film's inclusion in the National Board of Review's "ten best" list for 1937. Audiences more interested in entertainment were assured how undocumented-like the film was: it was "The Picture with a Punch," and a "Dramatic Story of Life and People in a Wartorn Village in Spain." Further publicity resulted from shortlived censorship squabbles in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. A review in *The Nation* during the film's third New York month, while acknowledging the bind of independent distribution, optimistically reported that Ivens was making progress and announced that more than eight hundred theaters across the U.S. had been signed up. The real figure was closer to three hundred. In other words, the film made an enviable splash in the art house/political circuit, but a mere ripple in the commercial sea. Ivens would not achieve his breakthrough until his own New Deal-sponsored film, *Power and the Land*,





Left to right: Joris Ivens, Luise Rainer, Joan Crawford, Ernest Hemingway and his wife at Hollywood fund-raising screening of *Spanish Earth* (photo courtesy of Jean-Loup Passek).

in 1940.

Looking back at his most famous film for *Cinéma politique*, from the vantage point of the late Seventies, Ivens felt that he could identify a certain impact that *Spanish Earth* had exerted on its own period:

*Of course you must not think that you are going to change the world with a film; all the same, there have been examples in history of films that have helped the revolution, like the Soviet films at the beginning of the October Revolution. In my own life, I saw the influence of Spanish Earth also: . . . it really provided information about a problem that spectators were not very familiar with, and it helped the antifascist movement enormously . . . directly even. People gave money for the International Brigades. There are militant films that have enormous power, and that is linked to the moment at which they are shown.*

Ivens' estimation is not unreasonable. Although his film had no impact on the League of Nations or the Western governments, it was part of the expanding cultural and political movement of the Popular Front period, providing an impetus while it was still growing in influence and expanding its base.

As part of this movement, *Spanish Earth* reflected many of its cultural and ideological tactics that were not directly related to the Spanish subject. The agrarian theme, for example, with its basic icons of bread, earth, and water, was central to the Depression imagination. Ivens' climactic image of water rushing through a new irrigation trough had already appeared in King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* (1934) and Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), and impoverished migrant workers and sharecroppers had been the focus of countless photographic essays and books, as well as Lorentz's first two films. The Fuenteduena peasants were thus recognizable, universal, as were Hemingway's vague references to the "they" who "held us back." Yet Ivens' Socialist Realist tinted vision of the cheerful collective work of his villagers lacks the plaintive, almost defeatist feeling of most American or Western European agrarian imagery. The primitive irrigation project of *Spanish Earth* will seemingly feed an entire besieged capital. What is more, the collective, non-hierarchical initiative of the peasants are behind this success, not the expertise of the New Deal agronomists who dispense their advice on crop rotation upon the helpless denizens of Lorentz's films from on high.

All the same, Ivens' refusal of a certain Socialist Realist dogmatism in his vision of collective work has a cer-

tain Popular Front ring to it. There is a clear division of responsibilities among the workers and the Mayor displays a certain leadership, even delivering a subtitled speech announcing the project. Ivens carefully avoids all possible innuendoes of collectivization, forced or otherwise; authority springs, spontaneously, out of an implied tradition of folk common sense. Though the Fuenteduena scenes establish a full catalog of the material terms of the village collective, with impeccable Marxist attention to the forces of production, it does so in a way that lets the signals of tradition, exoticism, and patience, conventionally attached to the peasant icon in Western culture, overshadow the signals of revolutionary changes. Discretion is the distinguishing feature of this vision of the agrarian revolution taking place in the Spanish countryside during the Popular Front.

Meanwhile, another theme emerges in *Spanish Earth* for virtually the first time in Ivens' career: the family. This theme revolves primarily around Julian's homecoming sequence, but it is also notable elsewhere: in the images of two distraught mothers, one trying to load her children on an evacuation truck in besieged Madrid, the other in the bombed village unconsolably bewailing her slaughtered children, and in a young soldier's goodbye to his wife and child before the final battle, elevated by Hemingway into a symbol of



“Hemingway’s voice, with its frank, low-key roughness, added to the text’s aura of personal involvement. . . . Instead of an anonymous voice, the commentator became a vivid character on his own terms, a subjective witness of the events of the film, a participant.”

the strength, courage, and tragedy of the family unit at war:

*. . . they say the old goodbyes that sound the same in any language. She says she’ll wait. He says that he’ll come back. Take care of the kid, he says. I will, she says, but knows she can’t. They both know that when they move you out in trucks, it’s to a battle.*

Compared to later populist-agrarian films like Flaherty’s *The Land*, (1940–42), Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), or Renoir’s *The Southerner* (1945), the family accent in *Spanish Earth* is decidedly minor. Nevertheless, it clearly points to Popular Front strategy of recuperating the values of mainstream culture: idealized families were highly visible in Frontier Films’ productions as well.

*Spanish Earth*, the first of the major antifascist films with widespread distribution, initiated a preoccupation with military imagery that would dominate the screens of the next decade, and does so in a specifically Popular Front manner. Beyond Ivens’ respectful treatment of soldiering as work, not surprising in the work of a filmmaker who had romanticized the construction of North Sea dikes and Soviet blast furnaces, his emphasis is on the humanity of the Republican troops. The soldiers are presented as little men, nonprofessionals. Shots showing “unsoldierly” signals are present throughout—untidiness, awkward drilling, grins at the camera. In one sequence about life in camp, the emphasis is on everyday nonmilitary activities such as getting haircuts, eating, reading newspapers, with the implication that the stake of the war is

the quality of everyday life. In the parade scenes, there is more interest in the rawness of recruits eagerly joining up than in the precision of seasoned troops, more interest in small irregular groups than in the symmetrical formations of Riefenstahl’s films. The Nazi ballets of banners and boots have nothing in common with the human scale and detail of Ivens’ *People’s Army*.

At the same time, Ivens’ attitude towards the Communist Party, its participation in the Republican government, and its leadership of the *People’s Army* follows the usual Popular Front practice of “self-censorship.” Specific political affiliations, whether of Ivens’ subjects, his hosts, or of Ivens himself, were not a topic for discussion. A film courting mass distribution and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as following the CPUSA line, declined of necessity



Ivens, Hemingway, and Ludwig Renn of the International Brigades on location in Spain (photo courtesy of Jay Leyda).



to identify the lineup of Communist speakers during the People's Army rally scene: for example, La Pasionaria, Jose Diaz, and others appear as "the wife of a poor miner in Asturias," or a "member of Parliament," and so on. Explicit political labels complicated the broad-based popular coalitions that were the mainstay of the Popular Front, as well as the effectiveness of Republican propaganda within the Western democracies. The existence of the International Brigades, composed primarily of Western leftists, passes unmentioned. Other important gaps in Ivens' coverage of the war are conspicuous: Soviet aid to the Republicans; the question of the Church, a major focus of pro-Franquist propaganda; the identification of the enemy—the Italians and the Moroccan mercenaries are discussed in surprisingly respectful or pitying terms, but the Spanish classes who supported Franco's insurrection are omitted, as is the name of Franco, and even the word "fascist" (other than in one excerpted speech); and, finally, acknowledgement of the political struggle going on within the Republican camp at the time, which would later come to a head in the Communist-Anarchist showdown in Barcelona near the end of the war. Although this latter decision to underline Loyalist unity is hardly surprising, there are works—André Malraux's *L'Espoir* (1937), for example—that reflect the diversity within the Republican ranks in a positive way. Of course, all of these elisions can be justified in terms of dodging domestic red baiters, religious groups, and censors (who had the habit of cutting hostile references to "friendly" powers such as Italy), but they are also part of a systematic effort to depict the war as a simple nonideological struggle of "little people" against "rebels" and invaders. The stakes of the war came across as "democratic" in a very loose sense, rather than those of class struggle. Ivens was perfectly consistent with CPUSA policy, which preferred in the late Thirties to call its ideology "Americanism," stressing "democracy" and "civil liberties" rather than class allegiance, and soliciting the support of nonleft unions, the middle classes, elected officials, liberal intellectuals, and even the clergy.

Ivens' carefully constructed image of the Spanish war and civil revolution succeeded on that level without a doubt. *The New York Times* was persuaded after seeing the film that the "Spanish people are fighting, not for broad principles of Muscovite Marxism, but for the right to the productivity of a land denied them through years of absentee landlordship." *Spanish Earth* was the first film to

formulate the concept of the people's war, a concept that would gain considerably in currency over the next generations of world history, and to insert this concept into mainstream public discourse. Of course the price Ivens and his contemporaries paid for this achievement—the soft-pedaling of specific radical programs and identity, the adoption of popular filmic forms—are still fiercely debated even to this day. But it was a price that the filmmakers of the Popular Front paid in full conscience.

What of Spain? How successful were the filmmakers in their short term pragmatic objectives? The commercial success of their film in its art house/political circuit quickly accumulated the funds to buy eighteen ambulances, which were sent to Madrid for assembly and deployment. Late in the war, when the situation was hopeless (for ambulances save lives, not wars), Hemingway gave a special presentation of *Spanish Earth* in Barcelona where a real air raid temporarily interrupted Van Dongen's synthetic ones. The film was revived in New York in February 1939 just in time for the final triumph of Franco. Its next revival came upon the death of Franco in 1975, throughout Europe and nowhere more eagerly than in Spain, a monument to the struggles two generations earlier of the Popular Fronts of both the Old World and the New, inspiration and instruction for the struggles that are still ahead. ■

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