

"Men Cannot Act in Front of the Camera in the Presence of Death": JORIS IVENS' "THE SPANISH EARTH"

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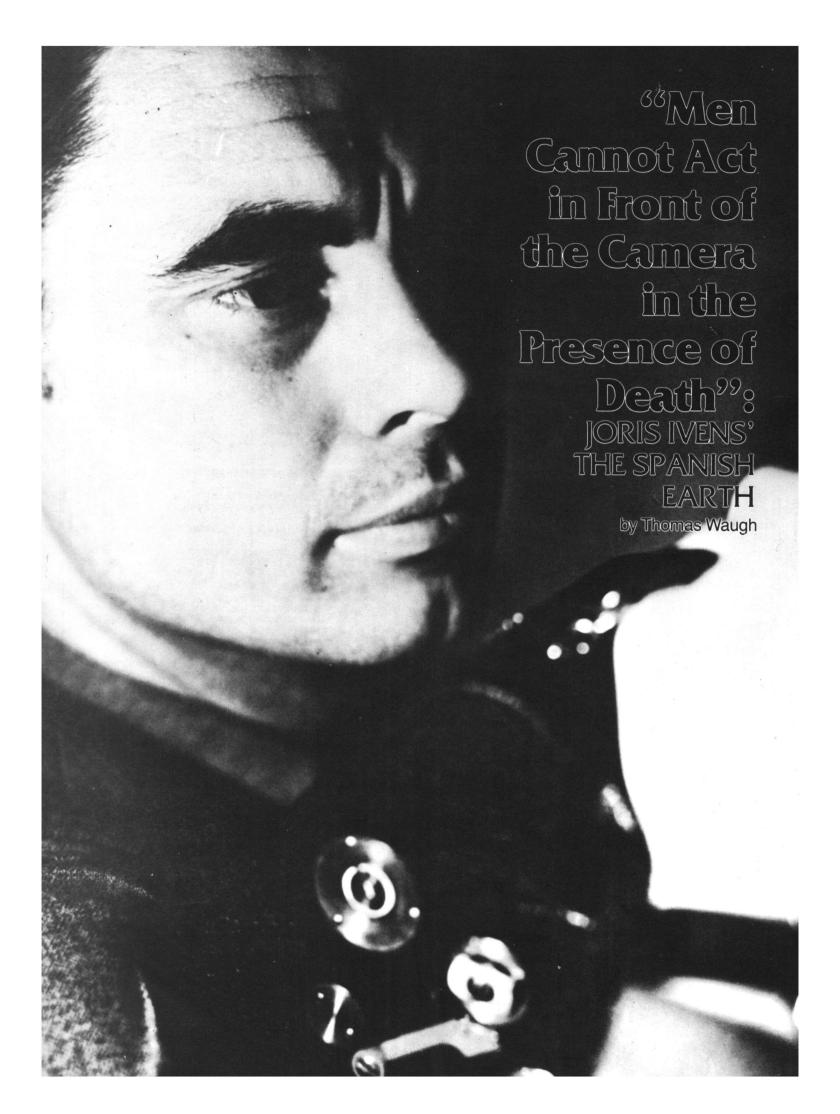
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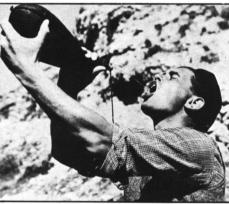
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n July 1936, when General Franco launched his revolt against the Spanish Republic, Joris Ivens, the thirty-eight-year-old Dutch avantgardist-turned-militant, was in Hollywood showing his films to film industry progressives. One year later, Ivens was in Hollywood again, this time officiating at the world premiere of The Spanish Earth before a glittering cross-section of the same community. A hasty, spontaneous response to the Spanish plight, directed by a Dutchman who had spent only a few months in the U.S., The Spanish Earth was also the prototypical cultural product of the American left in the era of the Popular Front, a time when the left was closer to the American mainstream than at any time previously or since.

The Spanish Earth represents also the convergence of two basic traditions of radical filmmaking in the West, of which Ivens has been the chief pioneer and standardbearer throughout his fifty-five year career. It is the definitive model for the "international solidarity" genre, in which militants from the First and Second Worlds have used film to champion each new front of revolutionary armed struggle, and of which the current El Salvador films are only the most recent chapter. It is also the model for the more utopian genre in which the revolutionary construction of each new socialist society, as it emerges, is celebrated and offered as inspiration for those still struggling under capitalism, a genre for which Nicaragua and Zimbabwe have offered the most recent stimuli.

For filmmakers engaged in the less romantic dynamics of domestic struggles, with documentary continuing to be the first recourse of radical artists on every continent (despite recent theoretical challenges to its hegemony within political film), The Spanish Earth remains a film of utmost pertinence. A special Ivens issue of Cinéma politique, a French review of militant cinema, listed in 1978 the major issues of contemporary radical cinema and declared Ivens' relevance to each one: "the relationship of form and content; collective work; the use of reenactment in documentary reportage; the role of the party, political direction, and the commissioned film; the opposition between amateur and professional (here one might add the increasingly important intermediate category of "artisanal"); the margin-alization of militant cinema in relation to traditional film distribution; exoticism, the romanticism of the distant valiant struggle, opposed to everyday struggles, and traversed by the complex notions of cultural neoJoris Ivens' classic documentary on the Spanish Civil War, a prototypical cultural product of the American left in the era of the Popular Front, remains a relevant film today, encapsulating many of the issues confronting contemporary radical filmmakers.



Joris Ivens on location in Spain

colonialism." What is striking about this list is that, aside from a few overtones of Seventies¹ jargon, it could just as easily have been written during the period of *The Spanish Earth*, so little have the "issues" preoccupying radical culture changed in the intervening years.

The Spanish Earth, finally, has a central place within the evolution of the documentary form, aside from its strategic ideological position. It defines prototypically the formal and technical challenges of the thirty-year heyday of the classical sound documentary, 1930 to 1960, in particular its first decade. It confronts, with still exemplary resourcefulness, the problems of sound and narration; the

¹The most detailed and reliable account of the ideological context of the films of the American Popular Front is Russell Campbell's 1978 dissertation for Northwestern, Radical Cinema in the United States, 1930-1942: The Work of the Film and Photo League, Nykino, and Frontier Films, to which I must acknowledge my indebtedness. William Alexander's Film on the Left: American Documentary Film, 1931-1942 (Princeton University Press, 1981) is a less comprehensive, more easily available treatment of the same subject.

temptation to imitate the model of Hollywood fiction with *mise-enscène*, individual characterization, and narrative line; the catch-22s of distribution, accessibility, and ideology; the possibilities of compilation and historical reconstruction, and of improvisation and spontaneity. Once again this list sounds surprisingly contemporary.

Joris Ivens disembarked in February 1936 in New York for what was to become a decade of work in the United States, the second decade of his career. He was entering a political context strikingly different from the familiar ones of Western Europe and the Soviet Union where his output had included avant-garde film poems (such as Rain, 1929), epics of collective labor in both his native Holland (Zuiderzee, 1933) and the Soviet Union (Komsomol, 1932), industrial commissions (such as Philips-Radio, 1931), and militant denunciations of the capitalist system (Borinage, 1933, and The New Earth, 1934).

The left intellectual milieu to which Ivens and his coworker/editor Helen Van Dongen attached themselves upon their arrival was deeply concerned by the buildup to war already evident in Ethiopia, China, Germany, and, soon, in Spain. Ivens had made his previous political films during a period when the international socialist movement had been oriented toward militant class struggle. Borinage and The New Earth had reflected this orientation with their uncompromising political postures and their confrontational rhetoric and form. In the U.S., the militant newsreel work of the Film and Photo League had matched this tendency in Ivens'

The militant era and the Film and Photo League, however, were both on their last legs at the time of Ivens' arrival in New York. The Nazis had eradicated the Workers' International Relief, the Berlin-based, Cominternsponsored parent body for radical cultural groups throughout the capitalist West. The main reason for the aboutface of mid-decade, however, was an official change of policy promulgated by the Communist International at its 1935 World Congress and obediently followed by all the national parties including the CPUSA. The crucial political struggle of the day was to be not socialism vs. capitalism, but democracy vs. fascism. CPUSA chief Earl Browder declared that democracy in the United States was to be preserved by a vigorous defense of civil liberties, increasingly menaced by fascist reaction at home and abroad. The earlier view of Roosevelt as warmonger, and of the New Deal as incipient fascism,

yielded to a new image of Roosevelt as champion of democratic rights and of the state as potential ally of progressive forces. Communists were to be ready to participate in joint action within popular fronts with the Socialist parties, civil libertarians, and liberal intellectuals. American Communists thus allied themselves enthusiastically with the social programs of the New Deal.

Leftist cultural strategy inevitably followed suit. The militant vanguardism symbolized by the Film and Photo League and the John Reed Clubs of proletarian culture was replaced by efforts by left cultural workers to express themselves within the mainstream of American culture. They were largely successful: the last half of the decade saw the left achieve its point of maximum impact within American culture and a close interaction between the cultural and political spheres. The influx of leftist intellectuals and artists from Europe, most of whom were political refugees from fascism (unlike Ivens-yet), stimulated this interaction, and the active involvement of the state in the cultural domain sustained it. The Federal Arts project of the Works Progress Administration was launched in the fall of 1935 and the same year saw the Farm Security Administration of the Resettlement Administration move into the field of still photography. The New Deal would expand into motion pictures the following year and enlist the talents of hundreds of leftist artists, including Ivens himself, before the decade was out.

The documentary movement was another dominant influence on Ivens' American cultural context. This movement shaped not only all the arts during this period, even modern dance, but also the humanities, the social sciences, journalism, education, and, yes, advertising. At the center of this current was the work of still photographers such as Dorthea Lange, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White, who began photographing the economic crisis in the first years of the decade. The infusion of state sponsorship into the documentary movement after 1935 ensured that the still photographs of the ravages of the Depression would become its most recognizable artistic legacy, but they do not represent its full scope. Photographers and filmmakers, especially those on the left, spread out from providing local evidence of hunger, unemployment, and police repression, as the first FPL images did, to shape encyclopedic manifestos in which the entire politicoeconomic and cultural system would be analyzed, challenged, and sometimes celebrated, all of which Frontier Films' *Native Land* did when it was finally released in 1942, and which Ivens set out to do in his never-completed *New Frontiers* (1940).

At first, the left documentary constituency thrived mostly on imports. Soviet documentaries, for example, were continuously on view in New York and other large centers throughout the Thirties—Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* was a hit in 1934. British films were also prestigious and popular, beginning with Grierson's *Drifters* (1929), which appeared in New York in 1930.

The first documentaries by American directors to play theatrically in New York, outside of the FPL agitprop milieu, appeared in 1934: Louis de Rochemont's unsuccessful Cry of the World and Flaherty's Man of Aran. produced under Grierson's British wing. The appearance of Time-Life's March of Time the following February, however, injecting dramatic and interpretive elements into the traditional newsreel, precipitated a floodtide of new documentary work in the U.S. The nontheatrical showing of Ivens' films in the spring of 1936 added to the momentum. By this time, interest in documentary was so high, that the work of the obscure Dutchman was praised rapturously, not only in leftist periodicals but in the liberal media as well. The National Board of Review Magazine's discovery of The New Earth led to the introduction of the nonfiction category for its influential annual ratings. Ivens' cross-country campus tour, organized by an FPL offshoot, the New Film Alliance, is a good index of the scale of the documentary movement in 1936, which extended as far as Hollywood.

The Rockefeller Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art were important institutional props to the growing movement. The latter sponsored the official Washington premiere of Pare Lorentz's New Deal-funded The Plow that Broke the Plains in May 1936, presenting a program that also included five European documentaries. The White House staff, diplomats, and members of the Supreme Court all showed up. Buoyed by this sendoff, Plow went on to 16,000 first-run showings and raves in every newspaper. The World's Fair in 1939 became the showcase for this first phase of the documentary movement, with Ivens' work much in evidence.

The strong popular foundation of documentary culture was essential to Ivens and other leftist filmmakers. Unquestionably a mass phenomenon, its artifacts ranged from Life magazine to I am a Fugitive from a Chain

Gang (1932). For socialists in the era of the Popular Front, mandated to politico-cultural enter the mainstream after years of marginality, to seek out allies among "unpoliticized" classes and groups, and to combat fascism on a mass footing, here was a vehicle for their aims. For socialist filmmakers still too distrustful of monopoly capitalism and the entertainment industry to attempt an infiltration of Hollywood, the independent documentary seemed to offer a cultural strategy that was clear-

cut. What was less clear at mid-decade was the direction that the socialist documentary of the future would take. Members of the Film and Photo League were sharply divided as to whether they should take advantage of the gathering stream of the documentary movement, as shown by the box-office success of *The March of Time*, or whether they should stick to their original "workers' newsreel" mission, with its marginal base and confrontational esthetics.

Leo Hurwitz, a chief architect of the decade, as early as 1934 established three priorities for radical filmmakers, which ultimately became part of a new consensus during Ivens' first years in the U.S.:²

1) Mass access for radical film work through commercial or theatrical distribution. Leftists were greatly encouraged by the work of their colleagues in Hollywood who had contributed to such "progressive" films as Fritz Lang's Fury (1936) and the Warner Brothers biographies such as The Story of Louis Pasteur (1935). The New Film Alliance, Ivens' hosts, sponsored symposia on The March of Time and on progressive commercial features from pre-Hitler Germany such as Maedchen in Uniform (1931) and Kameradschaft (1931). Ivens repeatedly praised such films on his tour and stressed the importance of "combining our work with the mass movement", and of, as he would put it a few years later, "break[ing] into commercial distribution [in order to] recover the social function of documentary''.3 Significantly, Van Dongen stayed behind in Hollywood to study narrative editing. Where an earlier generation of documentarists, including both Ivens and the FPL, had assimilated the technical and esthetic strategies of the European and Soviet avant-gardes, the generation of the Popular Front was looking west.

²A compact 1934 statement of Hurwitz's position, "The Revolutionary Film—Next Step," is anthologized in Lewis Jacobs' popular *The Documentary Tradition* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), from which the quotes in this discussion are taken.

2) The development of new "synthetic" film forms. Hurwitz argued that the form of the earlier newsreels had simply been an economic and technical necessity, not an ideological or esthetic choice per se, and that these forms must now give way to sophisticated hybrid forms including 'recreative analysis and reconstruction of an internally related visual event," or, in other words, mise-enscène. He stressed the professionalism of the required new filmmakers who would replace the earlier amateur and artisanal cadres. This position was anathema to Hurwitz's opponents, who invoked Soviet authority and the name of Vertov, conveniently overlooking that reconstruction or *mise-en-scène* had long since taken a central place in the master's work. Ivens' films, screened repeatedly for the New York radicals upon his arrival, unambiguously bolstered the Hurwitz side with their rich mix of actuality, complication, mis-en-scène, narrative, and even scripting (in his Soviet film Komsomol). "We must learn," he argued in a manifesto of the early Forties, "to think of documentary as requiring a wide variety of styles-all for the purpose of maximum expressiveness and conviction."

3) More profound political analysis. For Hurwitz the early FPL newsreels of strikes and demonstrations had been too "fractional, atomic, and in-complete" for adequate political analysis. The new "synthetic" forms would facilitate more "inclusive and implicative comment," and could "reveal best the meaning of the event." This "meaning" was to be a deeper, materialist analysis of the class struggle within capitalist society, and the forward movement of the working class, in both world-historic and individual terms, not just in the local and collective terms that the workers' agitprop newsreels had seemed to emphasize. Once again, Ivens found himself on Hurwitz' side of the debate. Earlier films, he stated in a lecture on his tour, including his own, were "just seeing things, not understanding." Art must have a "definite point of view," and must express this without "aestheticism" or sentimentality. "The difference between newsreel and the documentary film," he later explained, is that "the newsreel tells us wherewhen-what; the documentary filmtells us why, and the relationships between events...and provides historic perspective." The new "deeper approach," in particular the tactic of introducing identifiable characters into nonfiction filmmaking (which Ivens began calling "personalization" soon after his immersion in the U.S. milieu), is capable of "penetrating the



Left to right, Roman Karmen, Ernest Hemingway, and Joris Ivens in Spain, 1937 (photo courtesy of Jean-Loup Passek).

facts...achieving a real interrelation between the particular and the general."

The debate among leftist filmmakers was accompanied by organizational changes. Nykino, a new film production outfit, had been formed by Hurwitz and his allies as early as the fall of 1934, in order to put into practice the new priorities. The East Coast radicals were thus already set on a path closely parallel to that traced by the films Ivens showed in New York in 1936, that is, the evolution from agitational newsreel work to more systematic and ambitious explorations of new outlets, new forms, and deeper analysis. Ivens' effect, then, was one of reinforcement of directions already chosen and tentatively tested, or, as Hurwitz would put it, "a very important stimulus and source of encouragement," and as another Nykino leader described it, "a turning point . . a shot in the arm . . . assistance from a recognized filmmaker who confirmed the theories of Nykino." Ivens' Soviet credentials-he was fresh from almost two years within the Soviet film industry-added in no small way to the impact of this encouragement.

Ivens officially cemented his affiliation with the Nykino tendency in the spring of 1937 when that group inaugurated yet another production company, fully professional this time, to accomplish their goals: Frontier Films. Though in Spain at the time, Ivens joined the dazzling array of American artists and intellectuals who signed up as founding members of the Frontier production staff, board of directors, or advisory board. The Popular Front line was doing all right: both the West Coast and the East Coast were well represented, from Melvyn Douglas to Lillian Hellman, from liberals to fellow travellers to party members. Ivens had clearly aligned himself with the winning side. In fact, he had anticipated the Frontier Films approach the previous fall when he had enlisted many of the same luminaries to provide mainstream support—both moral and financial for his first American film, The Spanish Earth.

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³Quotations from Ivens' writings and speeches of the period are from his lecture notes for his American tour, preserved in the Nederlands Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, or from his well known autobiography, *The Camera and I* (International Publishers, 1969), in its final or early versions, for which some parts, also available in Amsterdam, began appearing as early as 1938.