

Joris Ivens; Filmmaker of the Twentieth Century, of The Netherlands and the World

Tom Gunning

Joris Ivens' life (1898-1989) and film work (1927-1988) nearly span the last century, witnessing this complex era and helping us grasp both its promises and betrayals. Ivens never refused to participate in the struggle to make history and was willing to risk history's judgment. Broken promises can be as significant as utopian dreams for understanding a century, and Ivens' films render the energy of the twentieth century both visible and palpable in both directions. Cinema was often described as the 'art form of the twentieth century'. That phrase, which once denoted the inherence of film in the modern age, now threatens to sink into an outmoded historicism. The century now has turned and its privileged medium appears to have been cannibalized by a host of new media. But we cannot let either the century or cinema disappear without wresting from them the promise they once held, a promise Ivens' work displays perhaps more powerfully than that of any other single filmmaker. Ivens was a major filmmaker from a nation without a major film industry, and he worked for most of his career outside his homeland. But I believe his somewhat off-center relation to the dominant centers of cinema as industry, as well as his distance from the ideal of nationhood, allowed Ivens to develop an unique grasp of the possibilities of the cinema as a modern art work.

In contrast to other founders of the modern cinema, like Griffith or even Eisenstein, Ivens did not conceive of cinema primarily as a form of story telling, but found its promise in visual observation. Without making a dubious claim about national character, I believe that Ivens' film work continues the centuries old Dutch tradition which art historian Svetlana Alpers termed 'The Art of Describing'. Alpers contrasts Dutch Art of the Golden Age with the Albertian Italian Renaissance, founded upon a theatrical conception of space and composition. Immersed instead in the optical examination of everyday life and of the objects that surround us, Dutch artists and scientists focused on the processes of vision, exemplified by the optical discoveries of Leeuwenhoek's microscope, rather than the mathematical and dramatic plotting of space found in the Italian masters.

Seventeenth century Dutch humanist Constantijn Huygens typifies this convergence of scientific curiosity with a passion for visual observation. Huygens explored the new modes of vision allowed by a variety of lenses and optical devices, from the microscope to the "camera obscura". This passion for observation and optical experiment was passed from Constantijn to his son Christian Huygens who invented the magic lantern, cinema's most direct ancestor. The environment that Ivens grew up in, dominated by CAPI, the camera and optical supply company which his father and grandfather had established and managed, and in which Ivens apprenticed, seems like a direct continuation of this technically oriented, optical tradition. Like the Huygens family, the Ivens family business provided a context in which visual curiosity could be channeled into direct experimentation with optical and mechanical devices.

Ivens' decision to take up filmmaking seriously came partly from his insight that the highly aestheticized Avant-Garde films (that he admired) ultimately relied on optical engineering and techniques of which he was already a master. During a visit with Walter Ruttmann, the German experimental filmmaker whom Ivens regarded as an artistic titan, he suddenly saw that Ruttmann's work was limited by an inferior camera and poor craftsmanship. In this area, Ivens realized, he was easily Ruttmann's equal. Ivens' technological ability brought to the Avant-Garde of the twenties a new modern vision, making the cinema a tool as vital for visual exploration of the world as the microscope had been centuries earlier.

Ivens' unique orientation comes into focus in his unfinished experiment, the I-FILM, in which he intended to use the camera to show the world from a subjective viewpoint. Undoubtedly inspired by the subjective camera which appeared sporadically in the experiments of both the German Expressionist and the French Impressionist films, nonetheless Ivens' approach differed greatly from that taken by Murnau,

Dupont, Epstein or Dulac. Ivens conceived his project less as a visualization of romantic subjectivity than as a technological experiment in capturing human vision, devising a camera whose lens corresponded to the human eye and whose camera mount could convey the gait of a person walking. Although Ivens abandoned this experiment when he realized the resulting film made viewers seasick, his favoring of optical experiment over subjective psychology highlights his visual, rather than psychological curiosity. Further, the film's most unusual aspect, its attempt to incorporate the bodily motion of a person walking into the visual experience of the point of view shot, signals one of the most important aspects of Ivens' cinema, his anchoring of visual experience in the physical body.

As Ivens' first masterpieces, *THE BRIDGE* and *RAIN*, make clear, this visually based cinema involved more than technical experimentation. The cinema's ability to seize an object from an unfamiliar angle and to inter-relate these viewpoints within a temporal rhythm through editing created not only a new way of seeing, but also a new way of *inhabiting* the modern world. Ivens' first films reflected the logic of construction and the mechanical rhythms of new industrial and technological environments. *THE BRIDGE* is not simply a record of a railway bridge, but the encounter between two machines, one titanic and one miniature. On the one hand the film displays the technology of the monumental Rotterdam lift bridge. On the other, it demonstrates the technology of another smaller, but no less well engineered, machine, the Kinamo, the handheld camera Ivens used to make the film. This lightweight camera became an extension not only of Ivens' eye but of his whole body. While the film explores the bridge from often dizzying perspectives, its viewpoint is never disembodied. Through Ivens' camera and editing we not only see and explore this modern structure visually, we inhabit it, we dwell within its perspectives and viscerally experience its rhythms.

Likewise *RAIN* explores the effects of a single rain shower on a modern city, creating a synthesized view point through editing, moving across space and time (Ivens, of course, shot many downpours in order to create this single filmic one), allowing us to live through an everyday event with all the vividness cinema offers. Ivens' camera is alert not only to visual patterns of reflection and refraction, of textures transformed by the sheen of moisture or an atmosphere veiled by soft rain, but also participates in the human interaction with this environment. The unforgettable moment of the little girls scampering through the frame wrapped in a blanket to shelter themselves inspired Ivens' observation, 'the skipping movements of their legs had the rhythm of raindrops'. This analogy cues us to the logic of Ivens' lyrical editing and its role as a guide to a heightened power of observation. Unlike many Avant-Garde filmmakers of the late twenties, Ivens' does not subordinate such human moments to the logic of an edited rhythm. Rather, the human body and its blend of grace and awkwardness becomes the basis for a cinematic rhythm built from the gestures, and patterns of bodily motion. Ivens forges the link between visual observation and lyrical transformation with a filmic poetry that comes from a clarity of perception, and a direct participation in bodily motion.

After his very first films, Ivens felt his work moved away from the formalist lyricism of these early masterpieces towards a more direct political engagement with the crises of the modern world. But the profundity of this later work developed, rather than abandoned, this participation in the life of the body and the eye through cinema. The film which pivots between these early formal experiments and the later films which focused more on the movements of workers is *WE ARE BUILDING*, and especially its gem *ZUIDERZEE*. While still outside an explicit political discourse, *ZUIDERZEE*'s epic portrayal of the closing of the Zuiderzee in order to create new farmland stands as one of the greatest works of art portraying human labor produced in the twentieth century.

The power of this work grows directly from Ivens' physical identification with the camera, the bodily involvement of his observation and participation with the rhythms of the workers. An anecdote Ivens tells in his autobiography about showing the *ZUIDERZEE* film in the Soviet Union illustrates how the film conveyed a sense of physical as well as visual knowledge. After a screening, a Russian worker objected that Ivens must have lied when he described his background as middle class, since *ZUIDERZEE* conveyed the work process in precisely the way a worker experienced it. Ivens, instead of being insulted by the accusation, realized the compliment to the film it implied. He explained how he had immersed himself in the processes of labor, carrying stones, moving supports, in order to realize how to film them

properly. Throughout the film one senses the actual feel, the tactility and weight of objects, the strain and strength needed to carry them. One moment in particular gave me the sense of the bonds of solidarity such labor could create through its direct physical demands. A group of workers carry a huge length of pipe. They carry it on their shoulders with workers walking together on either side of the load. In order to secure their hold and guarantee walking in step with each other, each worker has his arms around his partner on the other side, creating a unity based on physical intimacy and effort.

Ivens' political films not only captured this physical immersion in labor and the solidarity it fostered, but also the ambivalent demands of more technologically advanced industrial labor on the assembly line. Few films are as ambiguous in interpretation as *INDUSTRIAL SYMPHONY* (also known as *PHILIPS RADIO*). While this film inhabits the world of the production line as fully and sensuously as *THE BRIDGE* dwelt within its massive industrial structure, the physical involvement of laborers has become transformed by total mechanization. Here the human worker is caught within a web of industrial processes that is repetitive and spatially abstract. The very nature of factory space with its constantly moving conveyor belts, assembly lines and delivery systems, fixes the human gesture into a mechanical schema. Moments of old fashioned craft, such as the glass blowing (so much a part of the Dutch handicraft culture celebrated in the painting of the 17th century), here seem imprisoned - in competition with machines. Ivens has indicated he intended the film as a critique of the Philips plant, but as Hans Shoot has indicated to me, this did not reflect statements he made during production. Leftist critics such as Leon Moussinac did read the film as a critique of the de-humanization of the worker under capitalism. However, viewing the film, one senses an intense ambivalence. On the one hand, Ivens' camera does portray a dehumanizing system which contrasts completely with the physically bonding labor shown in *ZUIDERZEE*. Projected back to back, these two films seem to reveal - as no other art form could - the degradation of work in the twentieth century. However, *INDUSTRIAL SYMPHONY* also seems to participate in this technology, to celebrate it, to be attuned to it, to glide with the machines, to pulse with their rhythm, especially in relation to the music on the soundtrack. The film seems seduced into abstraction, however much its bad conscience drags against this momentum. The world of brightly illumined glass tubes and bulbs and the ease of movement endows the film with a sense of mystery that contrasts sharply with the immediately comprehensible processes in *ZUIDERZEE* (the earth and rock sink, the water rushes but is ultimately confined, the human arm and back accomplish it). The very ambiguity of this film (and the circumstances of its production, undertaken while Ivens was preparing to leave for the USSR to make films of the Five Year Plan, partly to raise funds, partly to mollify his father whose photographic company was producing the film) opens up the dangerous gulf beneath the promise of the cinema, the power of cinematic illusion which rides within the search for visual knowledge. Ivens produced a film which could satisfy a corporate sponsor or seem to leftist viewers to attack labor conditions. A film whose formal beauty, produced by a filmmaker becoming suspicious of such formalism, must cloak a degree of *mauvais foi*.

Jean Luc Godard has eloquently summed up the danger of cinema's promise of knowledge with his phrase: 'This is not a just image; it is just an image'. Clearly images speak for themselves, but they also take on meanings within a context, a context the individual image cannot always determine. I feel that Ivens himself demonstrated this in his 1931 film *NEW EARTH* which is often spoken of as if it were simply a new version of the *ZUIDERZEE* film. Instead, Ivens here submits his earlier material to a radical redefinition that records the betrayal of the promise of the first film by the illogical thinking of the capitalist markets. The 'New Land' created by human labor and technology in the earlier film, produced grain which - due to the collapse of the world agricultural market during the Depression - could not bring a profit to those who grew it. What could Ivens' heroic imagery of labor mean within such a context of inverted values?

He expresses this tragic irony not only through narration which explains the final fate of the new land, but also through a montage style which no longer restricts itself to inhabiting a single locale but cuts freely from newsreel footage in the USA and the rest of Europe to show the effects of this global market collapse. Ivens had learnt from Pudovkin and the Soviet filmmakers that editing created meaning in film, but in his previous films, editing primarily created the rhythmic interaction of the processes he filmed. Now, perhaps influenced by his recent work for the Dutch Communist party re-editing newsreels in order

to give them a revolutionary message, Ivens makes his images speak through ironic juxtaposition and contrast. The grain produced by the new land is poured back into the sea from which its soil was wrested by so much labor. Just as labor and effort and even the nourishment produced by nature can be betrayed by the ironies of the market, so a filmmaker must be aware of the ability of the film image to redefine itself, to protest against its own faith. The powerful images from Ivens' earlier film(s) no longer say what they once seemed to say. The knowledge and power they once held has been betrayed as well, as the images no longer are edited in order to make us participate in this creative labor, but, instead, these gestures are rendered meaningless by a political and economic system which their labor cannot influence. As the laborer's work has been rendered pointless, the images too are drained of their immanent significance, are hollowed out by the new editing patterns Ivens devised, which he himself described as being structured like a joke, rendering this heroic effort nonsensical.

I must confess I have not studied Ivens' later films to the degree to which I have examined his first. There is no question however, from what I know of this later work that he continued to be a great filmmaker, precisely because he continued to wrestle with the truth the film image seemed to carry and the meanings it could be made to bear. Ivens used films as a means in a struggle to understand the processes of history and to persuade others of his view. From the thirties on, this work primarily followed a Party line, sometimes in defense of a people's right to self-determination (*THE SPANISH EARTH*, *INDONESIA CALLING*), sometimes in a dubious attempt to shore up state policy - but always operating within Ivens' desire to change the world for the better. It is ironic to me that Ivens' series of films on the Chinese Cultural Revolution, *HOW YUKONG MOVED THE MOUNTAINS*, which I first saw as a contemporary document rather than a historical film, had the power then to obscure my understanding of that event rather than enlighten it. Ivens and his collaborator Marceline Loridan later realized their own lack of understanding of the events they recorded and their own complicity in this tragedy of history. That these powerful films seem to have betrayed the promise of cinema to show us the truth is less the mark of a filmmaker's failure than an indication of the deep danger and difficulty involved in the task of wresting the just image from what are truly only images. I am in awe of Ivens' work and life, a man who suffered and triumphed within the ambiguities of our last century, whom I respect as much for his failures as for his successes and for the fact that it is difficult even now to separate definitively one from the other.