

Curiosities from the archives

THE BLESSED

'For Joris Ivens, from whom the initiative for THE BLESSED originates (1953!)

With very best wishes for his creative plans

In old friendship

18.11.'85 Theun de Vries'

Up until now, no filmography, biography or monography on Ivens ever mentioned the fact that he commissioned a script, written by Dutch novelist Theun de Vries in 1953, about the philosopher Baruch (Benedictus) de Spinoza (1632-1678), the writer of *Ethica*. The complete script of THE BLESSED describes, in 107 sequences, the life and times of Spinoza, who was banned from the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam at the age of 24 and later on from the city itself, because of his radical philosophy. For De Vries -and presumably also for Ivens- the complex political situation in the young and powerful Dutch Republic of the 17th century was a very attractive subject. In the script, the rivalry between fundamentalist religious groups and sects, the fight between regents, free-thinkers, forerunners of the Enlightenment and conservative royalists, presents a deep insight into the national identity of Holland. Being a controversial philosopher, Spinoza had to manoeuvre between these different parties and try to stay independent, which included rejecting a professorship from the university of Heidelberg and an annual payment by the French king. For sure De Vries and Ivens recognised, in Spinoza's difficult position in Dutch society, their own troubled relationship with Dutch authorities.

Joris Ivens met Theun de Vries in 1947 when he returned from Australia and stayed in Holland for a short while before leaving for a life behind the Iron Curtain. At that time, De Vries was a renowned novelist, working on the trilogy *1848*, about Karl Marx and the revolutionary year of 1848. In the 1940's and 1950's, De Vries also acted as a prominent cultural representative for the Communist party in Holland. This position allowed him to travel behind the Iron Curtain and attend writers' conferences. Ivens and De Vries must have discussed the project in East Berlin in 1953, when Ivens was staying in the Newa hotel and was commissioned by the DEFA films studios to produce film projects as a director or artistic adviser. The script on Spinoza sheds a new light on Ivens relationship with Holland during the Cold War. Although his passport was cancelled in 1950 preventing him from coming to Holland, he tried to stay in active contact with his homeland. Of course the script couldn't be filmed in Holland, but the international reputation of Spinoza could have convinced DEFA to produce the film in their studios. The fact that De Vries and Ivens planned for a feature film and not a documentary wasn't that surprising, because both artists supported the ideas of social realism, or as De Vries described it, 'romantic realism' after a quotation by Maxim Gorki – the fictional interpretation of reality focusing on social aspects like class struggle.

Cover of the film script Theun de Vries wrote for a feature film of Ivens about Spinoza. Cover design: Mart Kempers.

Joris Ivens and Theun de Vries (?) in Amsterdam, 1947. Photo IISG, Amsterdam



Joris Ivens directing a historical feature: an actor playing the Prince of Orange in *Till Eulenspiegel*, 1956. © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI.

The Spinoza project never got beyond script stage and had been forgotten until recently. De Vries tried to get other directors interested, like Wolfgang Staudte, but failed. In 1972 De Vries continued his interest in Spinoza by publishing a biography and finally, in 1985, THE BLESSED. Ivens continued his interest in a feature film covering a Dutch historical subject, by asking another well known Dutch novelist Jan de Hartog to write a script about TILL D'EULENSPIEGHEL, the 16th century villainous character who opposed the Spanish occupants in Flanders. By coincidence, it was a subject on which De Vries had written before. Eventually Ivens rejected De Hartog's script, but nevertheless, the feature was produced by Ivens in collaboration with Gérard Philipe in 1956. This film, full of historical stereotypes, never reached Holland because it did not get past the Dutch censors. THE BLESSED and THE ADVENTURES OF TILL D' EULENSPIEGHEL are proof that, although isolated from his homeland, and under threat of prison if he entered Holland, he still tried to set up projects with fellow Dutch artists to cross the boundaries of the Iron Curtain using the medium of fiction.

Philosopher Baruch de Spinoza

