

Jan Hin: learning from Joris Ivens and Hans Richter

On a late Saturday afternoon in the dark month of December 1927, the staff of the Capi photoshop in Amsterdam were surprised to see a customer dressed in a cassock enter the store. ¹ He asked to have a word with Joris Ivens, the son of Capi's owner C.A.P. Ivens, who was acting as the manager of the Amsterdam store. The customer in question was Jan Hin, or Ansgar Hin as he was known after entering the Schotenhof Benedictine Monastery near Antwerp. As Ivens was the technical advisor to the Dutch film society movement *Filmliga*, which had started its activities earlier in 1927, Hin felt that he was the man to direct his questions to. Earlier that day, Hin had attended the fourth matinee screening of the *Filmliga* in the Centraal film theatre in Amsterdam. It had reinforced his idea to start a *Filmliga* branch in Antwerp, and therefore he bombarded Ivens with all sorts of questions relating to this intention. Ivens referred the matter to *Filmliga* secretary Menno ter Braak. Although the idea of establishing a *Filmliga* branch in Antwerp came to nothing, Hin was to return to the Capi store in the near future.

Jan Hin was the fourth son of C.N. Hin, the owner of a large hosiery factory in Haarlem. A Gold medal winner (sailing) at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp with his brother Frans, Jan Hin wanted to escape the oppressive climate at his paternal home and find a satisfying future for himself. He therefore joined the Schotenhof monastery as a friar. However, at around the same time the cinema became his great passion. He went to cinemas in Antwerp, Brussels and Paris, taking copious notes of what he had seen, and read the few serious books on the subject that were available then, such as Léon Moussinac's *La Naissance du Cinéma* (1925). Once he had come to the conclusion that his efforts to show films made by others would come to nothing, he decided to make his own. He left Schotenhof, returned to the Netherlands, bought a 16mm film camera and started filming. Sailing, in particular the trips made with the *Beatrijs*, the ship owned by the Hin family, offered him the subject matter that he needed.

In March 1929 Hin thought that the time had come to ask an expert for an opinion on what he had made so far. For that reason he returned again to the Capi store in Amsterdam (this time without a cassock) and asked Ivens whether he was willing to have a look at his film *ZEILEN* (SAILING). In this 16mm film, Hin had made an effort to show the various activities on board the *Beatrijs* by means of unusual camera angles and editing techniques. Ivens asked Hin if he would mind leaving the film behind, enabling him to see it at leisure, and he would let him know what his opinion was – Hin agreed. A few days later the film was returned to Hin, with an accompanying letter: 'My compliments for various good shots in this film. With regard to the editing, this is quite a bit of a jumble. I hope that you don't mind my criticism. For I have not seen the essence of sailing. It is still a ship that is sailing, but not "sailing" itself.'² Undaunted by Ivens's criticism, Hin ordered a viewer from Capi so that he could study the images that he had shot more closely.³ Ivens encouraged him to continue his film activities:



Jan Hin, 1932

'I find it of the utmost importance that several people in Holland, who have been touched by the *feu sacré* of the cinema, continue their work and it is therefore my opinion that you must surely go on. Where further possibilities are awaiting I'm not sure. [...] To find work in a decently equipped studio, in whatever position and wherever it may be, would be the best solution.'

Paris and Berlin

Hin hoped to learn more about film production in Paris. In the French capital he met the Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy who had plans for a new film and was willing to involve the young Dutchman. Moholy-Nagy, a typographer, photographer and former teacher at the Bauhaus, had made a name in the Netherlands thanks to his contributions to the periodical magazine *i10*. The Hungarian introduced Hin to the Russian writer Ilja Ehrenburg (another regular contributor to *i10*), who was working on the script of a film

Bert Hogenkamp

with the title *SARDINIS*. It was going to be a feature film about the life of the sardine fishermen in Brittany. Ehrenburg would later elaborate this theme – with a more pessimistic ending compared to the film script – in his novel *Die heiligste Güter* (1931). The production company was the Berlin based Prometheus Film. That Prometheus was controlled by Communists did not seem to bother Hin. After Moholy-Nagy had promised to let him know when the shooting of the film would start, Hin returned to the Netherlands. A few weeks later the Hungarian informed him that 'the script was not yet complete' but that he hoped to make a start 'with the indoors shooting' in Berlin around the 10th June.⁵

Therefore Hin travelled to the German capital in the second week of June 1929. However, upon his arrival he discovered that the Moholy-Nagy project had been further postponed. He applied for jobs with other film directors in Berlin and was lucky with Hans Richter. The two were not complete strangers, as Hin had corresponded with Richter in the Spring of 1928, while he was still at the Schotenhof Monastery. Richter was working on the production of a sound film, *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH*, in the Tobis Studios, which included some exterior filming at a fairground. With his 16mm camera, Hin shot the fairground in proper *avant-garde* style (using bird's-eye perspective, diagonals and unexpected camera-angles)⁶. The production lasted four weeks. Ivens was extremely interested in what Hin learned from it. But he entertained serious doubts about 'whether Richter can be fully trusted, artistically in particular.'⁷ Ivens hoped that the Prometheus production would proceed after all, the more so as he had recently met representatives of this company, who had travelled to Amsterdam and Rotterdam to shoot some material for the 'proletarian feature film' *JENSEITS DER STRASSE* (Leo Mittler, 1929). According to Ivens, the coming of sound was to blame as 'it has unsettled everything artistically, technically and financially.'⁹ Nevertheless he wanted to know from Hin all the ins and outs of the equipment used by Tobis for sound film recording.

On 25th July 1929, the premiere of *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH* took place in Baden-Baden. Richter had edited the fairground shots with captions, spoken text and music (composed by Walter Gronostay) into a kaleidoscopic film. Adhering to the *avant-garde*'s notions on sound film he had avoided any naturalistic use of sound. Tradition has it that some Nazis, present at the premiere in Baden-Baden, were extremely irritated by the modernist character of the film. As Richter was happy with Hin's contribution, he asked the Dutchman to stay on for another couple of weeks as an assistant on the production of *ZWEIGROSCHENZAUBER*, an advertising film for the *Kölnische Illustrierte Zeitung*. But by the end of August Hin found himself out of a job. The *SARDINIS*