

# Us 4 Revisited

## Films, Dreams, Pilgrimage



Marion Michelle and Slavka during the shooting of THE FIRST YEARS in Radilovo, 1947



Boyan and Dimitar, young boys acting in the Bulgarian part of THE FIRST YEARS © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI



Marion Michelle assisting Joris Ivens during the shooting of THE FIRST YEARS, 1947 © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI



Female volunteers working on the railroad, Yugoslavian part of THE FIRST YEARS © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI



Joris Ivens shooting the opening of a railroad track by president Tito © Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI

Between 1947 and 1949, Joris Ivens (director) and Marion Michelle (scriptwriter and assistant-director) started working in Eastern Europe on THE FOUR NEW DEMOCRACIES, which finally became THE FIRST YEARS. It was to be a film in four episodes, showing the life, hope and plans of people in post-war socialist countries – the 'people's democracies' of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Poland – known as 'us 4.' Valentin Valchev, a Bulgarian documentary filmmaker, is developing a film about the lives of the people presented in THE FIRST YEARS, shedding light on the changing circumstances in Eastern Europe.

The journey of Ivens and Michelle to Eastern Europe was a 'sentimental journey' to experience their dream, the emergence of a brave new world. They soon met their Utopia: in August, 1948, when Yugoslavia broke with the other socialist countries, the whole Yugoslav part - a youth epic about volunteers building a railroad - was cut from the film and then lost. Only a few minutes of the footage has ever been found. In 1949, a propaganda film sequence about the Marshall Plan featuring puppets, was thrown out of the Czech episode by communist party bureaucrats 'for not being serious enough.' Bulgarian communist party officials forced Joris Ivens to make changes to the Bulgarian film – and "add optimism and progress." The final film was premiered in Prague around Christmas 1949 and then shown in Paris in March, 1950. A month later the Bulgarians objected to the new, compromised version and recalled all copies from France, Italy, Great Britain, India and Hungary. '...our film is like an orphan with a great future, but the time of the future has not come yet...,' Ivens wrote in a letter to the utterly disappointed Marion Michelle in 1951.

Twenty years later, in 1968, Marion Michelle revisited Bulgaria and made the short documentary MASTERS OF THE RAIN in the village of Radilovo, showing the same places and same people that appeared in THE FIRST YEARS. She continues to keep in contact with the peasants of Radilovo to the present day. They are the only Bulgarian audience THE FIRST YEARS has ever had.

### US 4 REVISITED:

I am a Bulgarian filmmaker. I was born in 1962. A child of the Utopia. Seeing a film is like visiting another world. In the old film I visited 'Us 4' before 'The Fall' - in a time of solidarity and hope. If I try to sum up the message of THE FIRST YEARS in three words, it would be Hope! People! Future! My three words for US 4 REVISITED - Hope? People? Future? The film will be based upon my pilgrimage - "a child of Utopia" revisiting the "new democracies" of today.

The story of my film pilgrimage, more than sixty years later, is taken from following the same route as them. My pilgrimages and visual letters will cross-cut with conversations with Marion Michelle - about films, about the past and present, about

Utopias and the dreams of the 20th Century, about love, people, hope and loneliness. Worried about the deep alienation and crisis of identity in contemporary Bulgaria, I am trying to find a working answer about the future. On my first visits to Paris, Prague and Katowice I had the feeling that outwardly, Europeans are hard working, making money, having fun and keeping cultural traditions – but deep inside, are alienated and isolated. Am I right? It will be a film about humanity and the loneliness of the present day.

### My intentions:

#### Bulgaria: "Urban peasants"

In 1947 the people living in the village of Radilovo were poor, but open-hearted and decent, they had hope and made plans for the future. They, who had nothing but their life, their children, and their hopes and plans for the future, now see no hope and no future, and concentrate their plans on leaving the country. In 1947 there were hundreds of children born in Radilovo, in 1968 there were about 30 babies born according to MASTERS OF THE RAIN. In 2004 there is only one child expected to be born to Radilovo parents. The population of Radilovo is now mostly elderly. Their children and grandchildren are scattered all over Western Europe and the USA. Those who stay, envy the others who have left. But a baby is expected to be born in Radilovo in 2005. Hope?!

### Some stories and memories:

#### Radilovo, Bulgaria

The big family of father Todor and mother Slavka had a son who did not appear in THE FIRST YEARS, because he was in the army when the film was shot. Lichko was a communist activist, and went to Stalin's Russia to be instructed on how collectivisation of village land was to be done. In 1950 he came back and had to do the collectivisation. All the peasants were gathered to see how the tractor would plough the border between their pieces of land. Afterwards Lichko got on top of the machine to give a speech, but upon seeing the faces of the peasants, he could not say a word and got off the tractor. That same afternoon he embraced his 3-year old son and then shot himself. The child died several months later. There are some scenes of tractors ploughing the land in the additional footage that Joris Ivens was forced to shoot in Bulgaria in