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The Compass Rose **(GDR, 1957)**

by Dennis Hanlon (Beloit College)

Die Windrose (*The Compass Rose*) is a five-episode omnibus film made by a team of film technicians from the East German *DEFA Studio für Wochenschau und Dokumentarfilme* (DEFA Studio for Newsreels and Documentaries) in collaboration with directors, screenwriters, and composers from Brazil, the Soviet Union, France, Italy, and China (in order of appearance in the film). It was commissioned by the International Democratic Women's Federation, a group advocating women's rights that was based in Berlin at the time. Overall authorship of the film is conventionally attributed to the Dutch-born leftist documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens, although the full extent of his involvement in the project's realization is not well documented.

The film's structure presents five stories—one from each of five countries—introduced by a prologue. Each story explores the situation of women in a different country, and most adhere to a similar pattern: a woman, the protagonist whose name lends the episode its title, reaches her limit and decides to resist patriarchal oppression. At a key moment, she gives a speech that emboldens other women to follow her example. The episodes are further unified by production techniques and cinematic styles derived from Italian Neo-realism—which features the use of non-professional actors in all but lead roles, popular themes requiring minimal dialogue, location shooting, and unobtrusive camera movements and editing—although it must be noted that the episodes from the Soviet Union and China adhere more closely to the tenets of socialist realism than Italian Neo-Realism. The prologue, performed by renowned East German stage actress Helene Weigel, serves as a framing device. Appearing in a robe and looking as if she had just removed her makeup from a performance, Weigel tells us that she is not here to perform but to show us "scenes from the reality of foreign lands." As she points to the countries represented on a spinning globe, we get brief glimpses of the five protagonists. She concludes by explaining the conceit behind the title: the compass rose, she notes, "shows the way to seafarers, pilots, explorers, and seekers—the way to good destinies." The film, she suggests, is intended to illustrate the different ways forward for women seeking liberation in various geographical, political, and economic circumstances.

Die Windrose is thus in keeping with the broadly internationalist impulse behind much DEFA documentary production, valorizing the women of socialist lands, as well as women resisting oppression in the capitalist Third World and western Europe. Ivens originally conceived of the film as a series of thematically related stories that would be linked by documentary passages constructed from archival footage. He put East German filmmaker Alfons Machalz and French poet Vladimir Pozner in charge of the documentary part of the film. At some point in the production, the team decided documentary material would be out of place in what was becoming a fiction film. Ivens eventually agreed with this conclusion, in part because he saw the opportunity to make

two films for the sponsor within the same budget.[1] The documentary montage became the 22 minute film *Mein Kind* (*My Child*, 1956), considered by Thomas Heimann, the historian of DEFA documentary production, to be, along with *Die Windrose*, one of the aesthetic high points of DEFA documentary production in the 1950s.[2]

According to Machalz's account, Ivens assigned the general supervision of the fiction episodes to the Brazilian-born filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti, who is sometimes given directorial credit.[3] In this instance, determining the proper attribution of credit has little effect on how we interpret the film, in part because the directors of the individual episodes seem to have been given great autonomy, but more importantly because of the great similarity between the work and career trajectories of Ivens and Cavalcanti. Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (*Nothing But the Hours*, 1926), which he made as an expatriate in Paris, was the first "city symphony" film—documentaries of cities combining formalist photography and associational editing.[4] Ivens became acquainted with Cavalcanti two years later when he invited him to a screening of *Rien que les heures* at the *Film Liga*, the cine club he founded in Amsterdam. In 1929, Ivens made what many consider his first masterpiece, *Regen* (*Rain*), a city symphony-style portrait of Amsterdam as a shower passes through. In the 1930s, both would abandon avant-garde exercises in favor of social documentaries: Cavalcanti joined John Grierson at the Government Post Office Film Unit in England, while Ivens went to the US, where he made *Power and the Land* (1940) for Pare Lorentz, whom the Roosevelt administration had charged with producing New Deal propaganda. After the war, the US denied Ivens reentry, and in 1950 the Dutch government invalidated his passport and ordered him to return to the Netherlands; fearing he would not be able to leave the Netherlands, Ivens went to Prague instead. In 1953, Cavalcanti was invited back to his native Brazil to run the Vera Cruz studio, Brazil's ambitious attempt to construct a Hollywood-style studio; within three years the studio went bankrupt, however, and Cavalcanti was blacklisted. Ivens and Cavalcanti reunited in East Germany in the 1950s, after the film units they had worked for in the 1930s and 1940s were dismantled and Cold War politics made continuing to work in the West infeasible.

Both filmmakers turned to East Germany in part because it was actively recruiting documentary film talent and could guarantee both his work and travel. Karl Hans Bergmann, a co-founder of the DEFA studios, had first invited Ivens to East Germany in 1948, hoping that he would help create a new German documentary film tradition.[5] At the time, Ivens had been supervising the first international omnibus film with contributions from several socialist states, *Pierwsze Lata* (*The First Years*,1949); the

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[1] Machalz, Alfons, "*Mein Kind*—As if it Were Iven's Child," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, ed. Kees Bakker, Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1999. 110.

[2] Heimann, Thomas, "Von Stahl und Menschen: 1953 bis 1960," in *Schwarzweiß und Farbe: DEFA Dokumentarfilme, 1946-92*, Jordan, Günter und Ralf Schenk eds. Berlin: Filmmuseum Potsdam and Jovis Verlagsbüro, 1996. 71-2.

[3] See for instance the filmography at the back of the catalogue for a touring retrospective of Iven's work, Stufkens, André, ed. *Cinema Without Borders.* Nijmegen: European Foundation Joris Ivens, 2002. 89.

[4] Walter Ruttman's 1927 *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* captures a day-in-the-life of Berlin in this style.

[5] Jordan, Günter, "Between two Letters: Five Years and Half a Life, Joris Ivens and the DEFA," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, 88.

project foundered due to political pressures: Bulgaria demanded changes to its episode, complaining that the depiction of its tobacco farmers was too primitive, and Tito's split with the Soviet Union prompted the excision of the entire Yugoslav episode.[6] This experience, as well as his dependence on government officials to arrange and guarantee his travel during this period, in which he had no valid passport, seems to have encouraged Ivens to take up Bergmann's invitation. His first film for DEFA was *Freundschaft siegt* (*Friendship Triumphs*, 1952), a documentary about a student festival co-directed by the Russian Ivan Pyrjev. This lavish production, shot by twelve Russian and twelve East German cameramen on color stock, was, as Günter Jordan describes it, more a "triumph of logistics over art."[7] Ivens again lost control of the project when the footage was taken back to Moscow for editing. His next project for DEFA—and perhaps the best known of the six films he made there between 1951-1956[8]—*Lied der Ströme* (*Song of the Rivers*, 1954), was commissioned by the World Federation of Trade Unions to commemorate that organization's 1953 conference in Vienna. A collaboration among Ivens, Bertolt Brecht (songs), Dmitri Shostakovich (music), Vladimir Pozner (script), and thirty-two amateur and professional cinematographers on all continents, *Lied der Ströme* was once again a triumph of logistics; but, unlike its predecessor, it was also viewed as a triumph of art, at least among the Soviet bloc countries and left labor syndicalists in the West.

Die Windrose was Ivens's last major project for DEFA. He might have supervised the film more closely had he not almost simultaneously been offered the opportunity to direct a feature-length fiction film, the French-East German co-production *Till Ulenspiegel* (1956). Ivens had dreamed about making a fiction feature since the late 1920s, and the film, which was shot in France, also gave him the opportunity to travel and work there legally.[9] He would make France his permanent home thereafter, although it might better be described as his home base, since he continued to make films in Mali, Cuba, Vietnam, China and other countries until his death in 1989. In the end, *Till Ulenspiegel* was another disaster. The lead actor, Gérard Phillipe, took over the direction, and the film, which was intended to strengthen ties between France and the GDR, was released as Soviet tanks suppressed the Hungarian uprising. French opinion on the film was predictably divided along political lines. His preoccupation with *Till Ulenspiegel* aside, Ivens may have not supervised *Die Windrose* as carefully as earlier projects for the simple reason that he did not have to. Heimann argues that the makers of this film took advantage of the apertures opened in DEFA production by the thaw that took place after Stalin's death in a way few others did; according to Heimann, the inclusion of episodes critiquing the status of women in putatively socialist states would have been unthinkable before this thaw, giving further evidence that the film was a fortuitous product of the thaw following the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.[10]

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[6] Mundell, Ian, "Joris Ivens," available from http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/ivens/; accessed 18 January 2012.
[7] Delmar, Rosalind, *Joris Ivens: Fifty Years of Filmmaking.* London: BFI, 1979. 47.
[8] Ivens' DEFA works include: *Freundschaft siegt* (1951); *Friedensfahr*t (1952); *Lied der Ströme* (1954); *Mein Kind* (1956); *Till Ulenspiegel* (1956); and *Die Windrose* (1957).
[9] Stufkens, André, "Unfatal Attraction: Joris Ivens & the USA," in Stufkens, ed. *Cinema Without Borders*, 44.
[10] Heiman, "Von Stahl und Menschen," 71.

Although Ivens would not make another film in East Germany, he continued to be an important part of East German film culture through 1968, when he became *persona non grata* for denouncing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. In 1948, when Bergmann had first invited Ivens to East Germany, he was among the most well-regarded leftist documentary filmmakers in the world—his reputation eclipsing even that of his globe-trotting Soviet counterpart, Roman Karmen—for Ivens, unlike Karmen, was held in high esteem even in countries like the US. DEFA wanted to attract Ivens in order to burnish its reputation, to be sure, but also for the wealth of contacts he had internationally. Ivens used these contacts to help revive the International Week for Documentary and Short Films in Leipzig in 1960,[11] which would become one of the premiere international venues for oppositional cinema produced in the Third World in the 1960s and -70s. These contacts were also no doubt instrumental for the success of *Die Windrose*. Ivens had worked with Soviet, Italian, and French filmmakers in the past and was officially revered in China, where he had made *The 400 Million*, a documentary about Mao Tse Tung's guerilla army in 1939. We can surmise the connection to Brazil came through Cavalcanti, however, as Ivens himself would not visit Latin America until the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

Of the five episodes in *Die Windrose*, "Ana"—which takes place in Brazil and begins the film proper—is of the greatest historical and aesthetic interest. It was directed by Alex Viany, whose *Agulha no Palheiro* (*Needle in the Haystack*, 1953) was the first Brazilian film to extensively use Italian Neo-realist techniques.[12] The script for "Ana" was by acclaimed novelist Jorge Amado (1912-2001). The episode begins with a wealthy landowner looking to hire laborers in the markets of Sao Paolo. Plenty are available, but when he tells them the wages, they laugh in his face. His driver offers to find workers for him. He tricks migrants—picking them up along the roadside and taking their money in exchange for transportation to Sao Paolo—and takes them to the landowner's *hacienda* instead. When they realize what has happened, they tell the landowner the days of slavery are over. In a rage, the landowner whips them with his crop. Ana, a reserved girl who has already shown great tenacity in assisting another passenger give birth, grabs the crop and begins beating the landowner, who dares not fight back because one of the men has pulled a knife on him. The erstwhile captives then commandeer the truck, forcing the driver to take them to Sao Paolo, as promised.

"Ana" is remarkable for the simplicity of its narrative, as well as for the suddenness and ferocity with which communal violence against oppression erupts—qualities that anticipate Latin American militant cinema of the 1960s-1970s. Most significant, though, is the setting: the *sertão*, Brazil's underdeveloped and drought-prone northeast. The imagery of cattle skeletons, vultures, and tenant farmers taking to the road to flee the desolate land would all figure later in well-known works of Brazilian *cinema novo*, such as *Vidas secas* (*Barren Lives*, Nelson Pereira Dos Santos, 1963) and *Deus e o diablo na terra do sol* (*Black God, White Devil*, Glauber Rocha, 1964). In *cinema novo*, the *sertão* serves a dual function, as both a repository of revolutionary potential and a repudiation of the government's efforts to create an international image of Brazil as a modern industrial

[11] Now called the International Festival for Documentary and Animated Film
[12] Johnson, Randal and Robert Stam, *Brazilian Cinema*, Expanded ed. NY: Columbia UP, 1995. 32.

state, as encapsulated in Oscar Niemeyer's modernist designs for Brasilia, the new capital constructed in the late 1950s. "Ana" points to the future and the remarkable efflorescence of militant cinema that, beginning in the late 1950s, would emerge throughout Latin America and alter the trajectory of political cinema throughout the Third World and in Europe, where it would be championed at the International Documentary Film Week in Leipzig, to name just one important festival.

The other episodes of *Die Windrose* exhibit varying degrees of nostalgia for the past (the French resistance) and styles of filmmaking from the past (Italian Neo-Realism in the French and Italian episodes, socialist realism of the 1930s-1940s in the Russian and Chinese episodes). The Italian episode, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, follows Giovanna, one of a hundred women who work in a textile factory. The film begins with the women walking to work; they discuss the prior day's announcement that twenty of them will be laid off and speculate as to who will bear the misfortune. When the factory manager posts the list of fired workers, Giovanna pulls it down and tears it up before anyone can read it. The women occupy the factory. When her husband asks Giovanna to leave the strike and come home, she says no to him for the first time. The film documents the escalating efforts of management to break the strike and the effects these efforts have on the women's morale in a way that demonstrates that Pontecorvo had already mastered the attention to details of process and total lack of sentimentality that characterize his *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*), made ten years later.

The French episode, "Jeanine," directed by Yannick Bellon, fails in part because it was made a vehicle for two stars of the international left, Jeanne Moreau and Yves Montand, but also because of its sentimental and revisionist view of French history. Fifty-eight residents of a tenement are in the middle of being evicted on the orders of a developer. They are meekly allowing their belongings to be carted off, when Jeanine (Moreau), a teacher respected in the community, arrives on the scene. She confronts a police commissioner who backs down and orders the movers to leave. Under Jeanine's leadership, the residents win a court settlement that spares their homes. In the end, all they win is the right to continue living in their squalid apartments. Worse yet is their passivity before the police commissioner and the movers. As a prominent member of the French Communist Party, Jeanine's indispensable leadership suggests the vanguard role of the party in the workers' lives—something the Soviet and, to an even greater extent, the Chinese episodes conspicuously avoid doing. Further complicating the politics of this episode is a subplot involving martyrs of the French resistance against Nazi occupation; at one point we see a montage of street signs commemorating resistance fighters and recording the date of their murders by the Nazis. The East German sponsors of the film no doubt approved of this antifascist theme; but in giving it such prominence, Bellon rehearses a Gaullist revisionist history of France during the war, one which emphasizes the resistance while minimizing collusion.

"Nadeshda," the Soviet episode directed by Sergei Gerrassimov, is the only episode to foreground internal, rather than external, conflicts. Nadeshda has volunteered to join 10,000 other youths from the outskirts of Stalingrad to construct a new settlement in some unspecified place, presumably far away. Her fiancé, Grisha, however, has decided

not to volunteer, creating conflict in their relationship. Just before departing, Nadeshda is interviewed by a radio reporter, and she gives a stirring speech on patriotism and true love that makes Grisha change his mind. Balancing the needs of the individual with those of the collective is a theme running through all of the episodes, but only "Nadeshda" suggests that acceding to the state's professed needs is the correct way to attain that balance and the path to personal fulfillment. This episode is more about the recalcitrance of men than the oppression of women and, by portraying Nadeshda as incomplete without her fiancé, can be seen as an antifeminist paean to Stalinist family values.

Both the Soviet and Chinese episodes deploy the nationalist trope of the woman as figuring the nation, but the Chinese episode does so to condemn lingering chauvinism. Hsiu Hua puts herself forward as an electoral candidate for the leadership of a rural commune. That she wins, despite the active opposition of the elder men of the commune, suggests a popular disdain for such chauvinism among the women of the community. Hsiu Hua is depicted as the unlikely focal point for the women's frustration and the catalyst for their resistance; as such, she resembles more closely Ana and Giovanna, ordinary women who spontaneously emerge from the masses as leaders, than the charismatic Jeanine. Her tenure as leader is threatened, however, when a storm endangers the crops while the men are away gathering lumber. Hsiu Hua and the other women of the commune bring in the crop in time to save it, earning the respect of even the most chauvinistic of the men. The episode ends with the commune celebrating the harvest with a folk dance. It is the only image of a collective at harmony in a film otherwise dedicated to resistance and sacrifice.

Die Windrose's soundtrack is unique among the films made at the DEFA Studio for Newsreels and Documentaries. The dialogue is left in the original languages and is neither dubbed-over, nor subtitled.[13] In place of these, we get a rather sparing explanatory and commentative narration, written by Vladimir Pozner and spoken in German by five different actresses. The narrator of "Ana" is anonymous, but those of the other episodes are women observing the protagonist from the margins of the story. In the French episode, for example, the narrator is a resident of the house, the widow of a resistance fighter whose son has Jeanine as a teacher. The narration alternates between summarizing the dialogue and commentary, the latter usually being testimony as to the effect the protagonist has had on the narrator's way of thinking. Hsiu Hua's mother, narrator of the Chinese episode, tells us near the beginning that she wishes her daughter would not run for elections as leader of the commune, noting that a woman is better suited for occupations like childrearing; at the end, she remarks simply that her daughter is a good leader, adding that, if she was in her daughter's place, she would have given the men who congratulate her for saving the crop a piece of her mind. The sound design points to both the weaknesses and the strengths of the film. On one hand, the recourse to inspirational oratory—in all but the "Ana" episodes—is so familiar a device as to render translation redundant. On the other hand, knowing that dialogue would only be translated in the most summary form forced the filmmakers, when not indulging in oratory, to use visual storytelling means.

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[13] Strictly speaking, the episodes are all still dubbed; the film predates by about five years the invention of lightweight recording equipment that allowed for the recording of synchronized sound on location.

Above I laid out evidence indicating that Ivens had a limited role in the production of *Die Windrose*, so it might come as a surprise that I will now conclude this essay by arguing that the film bears his authorial stamp. Whether this is because he actually worked on the film more than the record suggests, or—as I think more likely—because of his enormous influence on politically-committed documentary and fiction film production, is an interesting question meriting further research. Whatever the case may be, there are two main ways in which we can clearly see his influence in the film. The first is in the use of individual protagonists to tell a collective story. In the early 1930s, Vsevelod Pudovkin invited Ivens to make a film about the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union. Ivens traveled to the remote town of Magnitogorsk, in the Urals, where he was to document the construction of a blast furnace. After flailing in his initial attempts to construct an epic of collectivism, Pudovkin suggested he center the story on a few main characters—advice Ivens heeded for the rest of his career.[14] Each episode of *Die Windrose* has a protagonist; but, with the exception of the French episode, the protagonist emerges almost spontaneously from the collective, which is simultaneously engaged in self-organization. Curiously, the episodes from non-socialist countries are most consistent in avoiding close-ups of the protagonist; although the women in the French, Italian, and Brazilian episodes are clearly the main characters and even leaders, they are consistently depicted as part of a group. The second area in which we clearly see the influence of Ivens is in the use of reconstructions. Beginning with *Borinage* (1934), an account of a mining strike in Belgium, Ivens would have people restage events in which they had participated and construct his soundtracks afterwards in a studio. Because of the anecdotal nature of their stories, the Italian and Brazilian episodes, especially, seem as if they could be reconstructions, although they are clearly fictions. It is perhaps not coincidental that, as he supervised *Die Windrose*, Ivens was simultaneously engaged in directing his first fiction feature. As reconstructions, this time of hypothetical events, the Italian and Brazilian episodes in particular indicate he was rethinking his practice and how it negotiated the fine line between documentary and fiction. In light of his subsequent incorporation of fictions into his films, *Die Windrose* must be seen as an important transitional film in Iven's career.

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[14] Stufkens, "Unfatal Attraction," 44.