

The Conscience of Cinema: The Works of Joris Ivens 1912-1989

by Thomas Waugh. Amsterdam University Press. 2016. \$124 hardcover. Also available as an open access E-Book. 779 pages.

reviewed by Brian Winston

'He has the face of a Russian', pointing at the other one of us who was working on a camera.

'Perhaps. But still he is not Russian'.¹

In the reality Ernest Hemingway was recalling in his Spanish Civil War short stories, the one fiddling with the movie camera was Joris Ivens; a Dutch shadow in Hemingway's memory, fictionalized into anonymity. And, it can be argued, that for Anglophone documentary studies, despite the attention paid him in fellow-countryman Eric Barnouw's path-breaking monograph of 1974, Ivens—the longest-lived (by far) of that generation of filmmakers born just before the turn of the twentieth century—has indeed long remained overly shadowy.² Until now.

It is perhaps no accident that Barnouw was a formative influence on Tom Waugh, the only professor at Columbia who stimulated him at the outset of what has been a distinguished career as a scholar and activist. It is too soon—thankfully—to pronounce *The Conscience of Cinema*, Waugh's fourteenth book, as a capstone, for who knows what is to come; but it can be judged as triumph—no other word will do. Painstakingly, he takes 779 pages to contextualize and analyse Ivens' complete oeuvre—extant, lost, projected, but unrealized—from the first home-movies of 1912 to the astonishing (for a man approaching ninety) subjective postmodern last film, *A Tale of the Wind* (*Une histoire de vent*), released in 1988. Ivens worked in every continent over eight decades, and as Waugh argues, his work can be read a virtual history of the radical documentary.

At every turn, Ivens encapsulated the challenges, potentials, and limitations of deploying film as a tool in the search for a better world. And, in my view almost incidentally as he did so, the filmmaker explored and challenged the technical and aesthetic possibilities of the non-fictional film through each stage of its development—from the silent poeticism of the 1920s, through the coming of sync sound to observationalism and on to the legitimization of subjectivity in the 1980s. With this book, Waugh follows him every step of the way. *The Conscience of the Cinema* gives detailed exposition of the context in which every one of Ivens' films was made; these production histories are complemented by close readings and, finally, studies of the films' reception, both at the time of release and subsequently. It is a veritable handbook on Ivens -- even compiling appendices listing other films about or inspired by his documentaries as well as interviews with the filmmaker. Ivens worked all over the world but made films in English only during the ten years 1936–1946, which may be one reason for his marginality. But, being for the Dutch a figure of much significance accounts (I assume) for the fact that Waugh's meticulous exploration of Ivens' work has been handsomely served by the Amsterdam University Press. It is hard to image an English-language publisher countenancing so long a monograph and producing it so lavishly. Of course, there have been other long examinations of documentary oeuvres but Waugh has moved the goal posts. No one has matched his

comprehensiveness³; and none has ever offered so carefully nuanced an account of the day-to-day realities of radical documentary filmmaking in the ethical quagmires presented by 20th century political extremism.

Waugh suggests that Ivens deployed three basic modes for the capturing of reality—'spontaneity...on-the-spot, spur of the moment' shooting, the most obvious documentary mode; 'documentary mise-en-scène' or organisation and intervention; and a tripod-bound approach Waugh terms 'the "newsreel" mode'.⁴ Ivens' first now canonical work, *Regen*, (1929) was filmed in rainy Amsterdam over a period of months in, apparently, this basic 'spontaneous' mode. The footage was narrativized by appearing simply to present one shower, its coming and its petering out. But it is not entirely fortuitous. There are some shots which feel—and are in the purely observational sense—too lucky to be happenstance...: a perfectly positioned skylight being closed against the storm, for example. These can be seen as examples of what was to become a defining element in much of Ivens' work—a level of intervention and organisation that stretched the definition of documentary.

Ivens was no shyer than Robert Flaherty had been when it came to preparation and reconstructions. The film he made with the Belgian director Henri Stork, *Misère au Borinage* (*Borinage*, 1933) documented a bitter strike which had occurred the year before the filmmakers arrived in the coal field of the Borinage. As far as the conditions they found were concerned, presenting them according to the norms of film grammar necessarily involved direction and repeated action. Events that had happened during the strike required wholesale reconstruction. But, in an era long before 16mm synch sound, and with obviously constructed sequences in *Nannook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) as a persuasive recent template, *Borinage's* documentary status was not (and cannot be) questioned. The images are of lived and witnessed experiences and the story—reflecting a preoccupation with labour that Waugh identifies as a central concern throughout Ivens' long career—was too important to be left untold.

With the coming to documentary of 35mm synch sound later in that decade, Ivens sought to combat the turgidity enforced by the cumbersome equipment involved by directing 'a certain amount of unrehearsed interaction', as seen, for instance, in *Power and the Land* (1940).⁵ He separately briefed his subjects to encourage a measure of spontaneity. Ivens' (somewhat Jesuitical) justification is that spontaneity was—anyways and always—fraudulent to one degree or another. He never fetishized non-intervention, even after the introduction of 16mm sync at the end of the 1950s. And when he does take up that equipment for the 718 minutes of *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes* (*How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, 1976)—made with his wife Marceline Loridan—he is at pains to explain that their style, although 'direct', is still not entirely non-interventionist.

Ivens' third mode—the 'newsreel'—figures more prominently in the decade from 1946–1956 in his work behind the Iron Curtain. Although he had shot an actual newsreel on a proletarian demonstration in Holland in 1930 (now lost), other more ambitious approaches to the category Waugh describes as 'agitprop activism' and 'solidarity' had taken over.⁶ Now, though, films recording Cold War events like *Peace Will Win* (*Pokoj zdobedzie swiat*, 1951), celebrating the second International Peace Congress held in Warsaw, consisted of little but 'impassioned demonstrations, speeches, and low key committee meetings....' in Waugh's description.⁷ Peace will win, indeed, if only by enforcing slumber in the viewer. But how Ivens came to be making such things brings us to the second possible reason for his marginalization, the real worm in the bud: his communism.

Ivens might have had the face of the Russian he wasn't but he was a life-long communist, visiting the Soviet Union for the first time in the early 1930s, working behind the Iron Curtain in the

post-WWII era and becoming, like many others, a Maoist apologist in the 1970s. But his oeuvre contains little or nothing recording the evils going on around him as he filmed. Although Waugh is perhaps a tad overly sympathetic, he is surely more than right to avoid the glibness of the 'useful idiot' slur that Ivens' politics might occasion.⁸ He does not exculpate him in any way. Rather, the details he meticulously provides suggest that, at the very least, behind the slurs lies an arrogant hindsight reflecting the luxury of non-involvement.

Take one undisputed documented instance of direct confrontation with the dark side of Stalinist reality. Ivens did encounter first-hand the suffering of the forcibly resettled wealthier *kulaks*, higher-income peasants, during his second visit to the USSR to make *Song of the Heroes* (*Komsomol: Presn o Geroyach*, 1933). However, their situation was physically little worse than those of the Komsomol, the young communist enthusiasts whom Ivens was filming—and, indeed, those of Ivens and his crew.

At the time, it was not so black and white. Ivens, as an exemplary 'premature anti-fascist', constantly caused supposedly liberal authorities in the west to censor his work directly or (de facto) by denying his films distribution.⁹ The repression in the East thus affected him less than did the hostility he encountered in the West. And while *bien-pensants* (orthodox) leftists repudiated Stalinism after WWII as 'the god that failed', it did not fail Ivens.¹⁰ His support of the Indonesian independence movement seeking to throw out the Dutch caused his government to revoke his passport. He was behind the Iron Curtain from 1946–1956 not least as a political refugee.

Then, in China in the later 1970s, he was cocooned by his friendship with the premier, Zhou Enlai whom he had met when filming *The 400 Million* (1939) about the heroic struggle against the fascistic Japanese. Zhou, at the end of his life, invited the making of *Yukong* to document the Cultural Revolution. 'Do you understand what the Culture Revolution is?' Loridan asks a fisherman in 'The Fishing Village' episode of the film. 'I don't understand', he replies. He has to be lying, the censors told them—because, obviously, socialist realism 'demands' that he really understands it.¹¹ The dying Zhou could not protect the film and Ivens and Loridan, on his advice, fled the country with their footage. In the upheavals following the death of Mao himself, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution were revealed. What Waugh calls 'the elisions, tensions, and ambiguities' behind which Ivens had hidden during the long decades of his persistent loyalty to the communist dictators finally no longer served. The dead millions, victims of Mao's 'Revolution' cried out and Ivens himself came to see *Yukong* as a shameful whitewash. Finally, the communist 'god' died. But as Waugh makes clear, Ivens' choices were always between black and blacker. Waugh's sympathetic understanding of the filmmaker's political dilemmas is informed by his own activism and his first person testimony on this effectively refines the black or white partisanship of previous Ivens scholarship.¹²

Tom Waugh's involvement with Ivens first saw the light of day in his 1981 doctoral dissertation, the same year that Bill Nichols published *Ideology and the Image*—both pointing to the emergence of a vibrant sub-field of documentary studies.¹³ Thirty-five years on, *The Conscience of the Cinema* brilliantly celebrates the maturity and relevance of that scholarly enterprise.

¹ Ernest Hemingway, "Under the Ridge," in *The Complete Short Stories Of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition* (New York: Scribner, 1987), 362.

² Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

³ Paul Henley on Jean Rouch comes closest. See Paul Henley, *The Adventures of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For other examples, See Thomas Benson and Carolyn Anderson, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989); Barry Grant, *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Jack Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

⁴ Thomas Waugh, *The Conscience of Cinema: The Works of Joris Ivens 1912-1989* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016) 89, 91, 208.

⁵ Joris Ivens, "Collaboration in Documentary," *Films* 1, no. 2, (1940), 2.

⁶ Waugh, *The Conscience of Cinema*, 29-30.

⁷ Waugh, *The Conscience of Cinema*, 365.

⁸ Safire, William (12 April 1987). "[On Language: Useful Idiots Of the West](#)". *The New York Times*. [Retrieved 23 Jan 2018].

⁹ A term used to describe Ivens by Rosalind Delmar. See Rosalind Delmar, *Joris Ivens: 50 Years of Film-Making* (London: British Film Institute, 1977), 33.

¹⁰ Arthur Koestler et al., *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950).

¹¹ Xiaoqing Yan, "The Same Lady, The Different Camera" [一样的夫人,不一样的摄影机/*yiyang de furen, buyiyang de sheyingji*], *Xinmin Evening News*, March 19, 2012.

<http://roll.sohu.com/20120319/n338193884.shtml>. I am indebted to Wang Chi for this reference.

¹² Waugh, *The Conscience of Cinema*, 246.

¹³ Thomas H. R. Waugh, "Joris Ivens and the Evolution of Radical Documentary," PhD diss., Columbia University, 1981, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Full Text, (8125411); Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).