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The Conscience of Cinema: The Works of Joris Ivens 1912–1989, by Thomas Waugh. Amsterdam University Press, 2016, 780 pp.

Jonathan Kahana

This imposing volume is the product of decades of research by Thomas Waugh, the author and editor of several books in the fields of film studies, visual studies, and gay and queer cultural issues, who is also perhaps the most venerable and important English-language historian of documentary film politics. This massive work—nearly eight-hundred pages with filmography and illustrations, covering the entirety of Ivens's almost eighty-year career—is itself a kind of career survey, a mashup of the author's earliest mature work of scholarship, a Columbia University doctoral dissertation from the 1980s, and some of his latest research, employing newly restored films recently made available on a new DVD set beautifully produced (if selectively and somewhat tendentiously left incomplete) by the Ivens estate and foundation. Outside of a small handful of his Modernist and Popular Front works, many of the films discussed in this all-encompassing appreciation are today rarely programmed or seen. Thus, it is a shame that the book is so minimally illustrated, an effect of behind-the-scenes image-reproduction rights struggles that plague many publications in film and media studies. But the writing is as fine-grained as one could hope for with such an artform at once so wide-ranging and so specific. Indeed, a measure of how thorough in his treatment of Ivens's work and methods Waugh can be is that he spends seven pages documenting the production of a film that Ivens began but never completed during the Second World War for the Canadian government before he deals with the extant version of the film (*Action Stations*, 1943). This is not the only time that the book deals with an abandoned, incomplete or overhauled project, resulting in a very different finished product from what funders and planners might have originally conceived—not, of course, an uncommon experience in the happenstance and contingent world of documentary filmmaking, but one that not all commentators have the room and patience to deal with so generously as Waugh does here.

The reader of this book, which initially appears to be a standard auteurist treatment of a great film author, will be surprised and delighted to find Waugh occasionally making room to reflect on this life-long preoccupation, and at moments one would least expect. In the final movement of the book he twines his own nascent biographical strand around that of the senior model of radical intellectual presented by Ivens, capturing an entire history of the early 1970s in lower Manhattan in one epic passage:

> [In 1972] I was soon looking for a doctoral research subject but was increasingly frustrated by my program at Columbia, which I found to be a cloister of apathy, formalism, and mediocrity. Shaped like many other young intellectuals in the West in those heady days by the New Left and the emerging social movements of the 1970s, including feminism and soon enough gay liberation, I looked off-campus for my

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> intellectual and political community and quickly found it in many places: in an eclectic intellectual-artistic heritage that ranged from Vertov and Grierson (yes!) to Brecht and Marcuse; in the increasingly articulate networks of radical proto-queers that I was reading *Das Kapital* with once a week; in the cluster of radical film critics, teachers, and historians at the rival university, NYU, including the gentle and generous Jay Leyda, who eventually confessed to me that he had been Ivens's ghostwriter for *The Camera and I*; and in the increasingly influential political film mags led by *Cineaste*, *Screen* and the brand new *Jump Cut* from 1974 onwards (I was spending a stultifying summer working in the Columbia library periodicals room and there discovered the then Berkeley-and-Chicago rag's inaugural issues, emblazoned with Shirley Temple but bursting inside with perspectives of Cuban cinema and working-class Hollywood, and denunciations of the auteurist film studies regime I was being fed at Columbia; it lit a fire under me). (565–6)

Because Ivens's career covered so many decades and passed through, and by, so many fashions in radical politics and documentary filmmaking, at various points the book functions like a study of the history of its critical field. This provides a dual opportunity for Waugh: to do justice to the great accomplishments of Ivens and his various cinematographers at developing a pathbreaking method of mise en scène in and of the real, a style of working with real life under conditions of stress and urgency that has shaped how many documentary viewers see reality on screen, even if many will be unfamiliar with the name of this Dutch world-traveller or some of his most important films; and to consider Ivens's work of this or that period, location, or ideology against prevailing and retrospective attitudes to the matter of documentary film. The field of documentary film studies has been in existence for nearly a hundred years, though it is only in recent decades that it has ventured beyond descriptions of subject matter or evaluations of single films and single authors and, in the realm of film politics, beyond what Waugh—a veteran of magazine-based and journalistic precincts of criticism—disdains in his introduction as "*ad hoc* critical principles, outdated conceptual models, and the frequent substitution of ideological fervour for ideological, historical, and formal analysis" (39). From one perspective, *The Conscience of Cinema* recalls such time-honoured models of scholarship, in its modelling of the *Künstlerroman*, and Waugh carefully documents and returns frequently to biographical facts in an auteurist vein, odd as it may be to speak of documentary—one of the least ostensibly "authored" of modern cultural forms— in this way. But Waugh never leaves these factual traces of the individual life unexamined, and is diligent about placing such facts of individual life and artistic vocation in social and collective context, as well as in a richly gossipy setting of private and domestic entanglements, as Ivens partnered with a long succession of important female collaborators in life, work, and travel—up to and including his executor, Marceline Loridan Ivens, who had herself played an important role in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's landmark documentary *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961). Waugh speaks of the early "mutual complementarity" between Ivens and the Dutch artistic and then political avant-gardes of the 1920s, and he finds the same complementarity between Ivens and various work partners throughout Ivens's career (55). Waugh is scrupulous about expanding the term "director" beyond its usual limits in film studies, where the author-function tends to stand in for collective or distributed means of production.

Delegating creative responsibility to coworkers and others is a "familiar pattern" in Ivens's career starting with the films of the early 1930s like *Creosoot* (*Créosote*, 1931) and *Zuiderzee* (*Zuiderzeewerken*, 1930), where it is given a characteristic screen shape as a "choreography of collective work" that demonstrated what Ivens referred to as an "entire complex of idealism" (123). Waugh's sensitivity as a cultural historian and theorist to what these things (collaboration, collectivity, culture) mean in relation to labour, industry, and capital is indicated in his capacity for unfolding the otherwise mundane bureaucratic and technical aspects of production; like when he observes, of a commissioned educational film made early in Ivens's nontheatrical film career, that this particular film—a film marking an anniversary of the Dutch construction workers' union and lending support to a recruitment effort—was a work of "useful" cinema with a dual purpose, both cultural celebration and agitprop. And as Waugh gleans from Ivens's own reflections on this commission, the film nonetheless managed to incorporate a sort of cultural legend, "the old guild idea: the pride and importance of a man who works with his hands, who builds factories, homes, schools, and dams. The pride of labour in itself, in its results and its function in society" (103). And Waugh notes that this professional–industrial aspect of Ivens's career is such a firmly established feature of his reputation that the film-historical influence of Ivens has been diminished by association with this apparently perfunctory, nonartisanal form of film production; an important part of the voluminous story of this several-decades-long, globe-travelling career is precisely its accretion of blind spots for film historians:

> The integration of the artist in society has meant for Ivens many occasional works done as favours to people [including his own family] and causes, as well as the series of "masterpieces" that film history is usually about; it has meant the artist at the disposal of many varied social forces, the artist as a worker always having to earn a difficult living as well, the artist answering the demands of film prose and pragmatism as well as the demands of "art" (105).

Ivens's life and career can, as Waugh shows, be used as a graph along which to plot the undulations of the international socialist cause, following it onto its newest fronts. From Russia, where he made *Komsomol* aka *Song of Heroes* (*Pesn o geroyakh*) in 1932 with the support of Mezhrabpom, the Soviet-German film organisation aligned with the Workers International Relief, and *The Spanish Earth*, his great collaboration with American partisans of the Republic in 1937, Ivens travelled to Eastern Europe, where he made a Cold War series of films now essentially disowned by the Ivens estate, and then China, Cuba, and Southeast Asia as communist revolutions took hold around the globe. This itinerary helped Ivens develop his unique variation on the style called socialist realism, what Waugh refers to with Ivens's early concept of "personalisation", a technique that borrows from, without exactly employing, the stiff dramaturgy of heroic characterisation typical of certain kinds of Soviet narrative film production in the Stalinist era. Drawing on Aleksandr Dovzhenko's filmmaking and film theory of the time around his production of *Earth* (*Zemlya*, 1930) and another film about collectivisation from the same period, Fridrikh Ermler and Sergei Yutkevich's *Counterplan* aka *Shame* (*Vstrechnyy*, 1932), Ivens's concept of "personalisation" strives for the production of what Waugh calls a "real yet symbolic and exemplary hero, defined precisely in behavioural terms yet clearly representative of a certain collective evolution"—in other words, a composite character rather than a self-made, self-sustaining individual, and one, furthermore, whose composite nature is plainly indicated by the cinematic and dramaturgical aspects of form (155).

Following *Komsomol* in both Ivens's career and Waugh's account is the 1934 remaking of a film Ivens had "definitively finished" just the year before, a reassessment that bears at once on Ivens's method and Waugh's (163). First completed just prior to the international conversion to sound that gradually affected most film industries' means of production, and that of the nonfiction cinema and cinemas outside the technologically overdeveloped countries of the West later than many others, the film *Zuiderzee* (or "southern sea", the name of the North Sea bay closed off and converted from salt to fresh water in a massive land reclamation project, an event that took ten years and ten thousand workers) was reconceived and reconstructed by Ivens in a way that reflected both the technological modernisation that overhauled his industry and the ideological shift that had split his early career into one celebrating purely instrumentalist regimes of formal and technical innovation and one more focused on the ideological problems. Where *Zuiderzee* told a triumphant tale of labour's collective effort to reshape nature, the reconstruction—now called *New Earth* (*Nieuwe Gronden*, 1933)—became a tragic story of class conflict and macroeconomics, the fixing of world markets to engineer surpluses and scarcity. In this sense, then, Waugh's film-historical account of the radical shift in Ivens's political grammar of the early 1930s—where "films using an indirect, narrative form to recount for passive audiences the victories of labour would have to be replaced by films that assaulted and accused these audiences […] exploding the myths of worker-society unity"—matches its subject matter step for step as critical history, refusing to take the historical record at face value and rejecting the New Objectivist faith in the self-sufficiency of images as historical evidence (163–4). This shift occurs at roughly the same time that Ivens was completing his landmark film *Misére au Borinage* (1934), the account of a strike by miners in a region of Belgium famous for labour unrest over generations, a project that signified a number of important developments in Ivens's style and politics from, as one critic has put it, "the poet to the militant" (172). With *Borinage*, Ivens forges a number of hallmarks of his long and wide-ranging career, characteristic ways of working that would define his films and his filmmaking—and that of the international documentary Left more generally—through many phases and many locations. These by-now familiar tropes include: a newly "weaponised" use of film on behalf of working-class struggle, and an emphasis on the workers' levers of change, rather than simply a sympathetic illustration by aesthetic means of the context or constituency of these struggles; a type of "anti-aesthetic" that rejected modernism's brilliant designs for the more quotidian domain of what Ivens called "unpleasant truths" (181); and an effort to link local and individual circumstances to a global situation—in this case, connecting the miners' "frightful poverty" to the "economic anarchy of the capitalist system" (176). The last of these themes in particular would become a kind of calling card for Ivens in his itinerant pursuit of global causes, developing into the trope of the "People's War" that Ivens established in his films of the later 1930s and 40s, while based for a time in the US, Spain and China, before travelling with this concept to the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Vietnam later on.

The second part of *The Conscience of Cinema*, begun decades after the writing in the 1970s and 80s of the doctoral dissertation that resulted in the first part of the book, picks up at the start of the Cold War. Ivens continues to work in collaborative fashion in this period, as well as in the role of a commissioned political operative. And even if he was starting to have strong misgivings about becoming "court photographer" of Party and Congress in the approved Soviet socialist realist style, it was still a period of some remarkable creative partnerships (373). On films concerning Bulgaria, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany—none of which are represented in the restored DVD set—Ivens worked with some of the best-known artists in international communism and the Soviet Union, including Paul Robeson, Béla Balázs, Bertolt Brecht, Hanns Eisler and Dmitri Shostakovich. It is unfortunate that such works are today largely buried in archives around the world, even if the Ivens estate, in the voice of Loridan Ivens, now dismisses the films and their motives as "outdated"; after all, avers Waugh, such is the inherent condition for the crafting of *any* film of political commitment (382). Waugh documents in granular detail the relationships of state, party, and studio operatives that made Ivens seem, when working with DEFA in the DDR, field cinematographers in Africa and India, Soviet archives, or the musical talents of Robeson as much an orchestrating editor or producer as what we would normally assign the inadequate term "director".

Because of Western colonial and capitalist powers' regimes of censorship—or perhaps just Cold War film societies' flagging interest in left-radical documentary—most of the films of this period of Ivens's work have rarely if ever been show in public in the West, although they were staples of communist film education in places like Lodz, Leipzig, Paris, and Beijing throughout this period. This section of the book is, among other things, an argument for a reconsideration of socialist realism as varieties of humanistic idealism, not a dogmatic monoculture, and, in this way, not so different as a set of industrial, artistic, and economic limits and conditions than any other large-scale model of cinematic production, with no lesser degree of "inventiveness, impact, and contradictory achievement" (397). In one long, brilliant sentence, Waugh proposes a thoroughgoing reappraisal of the Cold War in the arts that functions also as a question about *why* so much writing on left filmmaking and art of the era shies away from the hard work of this revaluation and leaves the raw materials in the archives, awaiting inspection.

In 1956, Ivens resettles in Paris to begin the long final movements of his life's work. From the late 1950s onward, this work divides roughly into phases that mirror the earlier parts of his career: first, what Waugh calls a "lyrical essay film" phase that returns to Ivens's youthful experimentations and coincides with his decisive departure from the Soviet Bloc countries, while managing to immerse Ivens in the world of anti-capitalist and anti-communist struggle in locations such as the Caribbean, Latin America, West Africa and Southeast Asia. Here, Ivens boldly combines documentary modes that don't often go together: what Waugh refers to as the "indirect address of narrative and exposition with the direct address of spectatorial interpellation and enlistment" (418). This unusual combination results in a series of films that focus on the feeling of disparate places: the banks of the Seine; the hills of Valparaiso; rural China; Venice and the industrial Po Valley in the North of Italy, places where the rural and the urban come into contact. These disjunctive locations reach a point of intensive abstraction worthy of Ivens early, gloriously modernist film *Rain* (*Regen*, 1929) with *Pour le mistral* (1966), shot on 35mm in black and white and colour in 1965, Ivens's film about the place defined by an equally unpredictable documentary weather event—a film, in other words, about the unstable place of the wind, an "invisible entity" as much a challenge to record sonically as visually (481).

At roughly the same time that Ivens is experimenting with a new kind of lyricism in a variety of far-flung urban and rural sites, he was throwing himself back into his other early preoccupation, the "people's war", by turning his attention—and again, that of many notable collaborators—to Southeast Asia. In this phase of Ivens's work, Waugh notes again a significant change in the filmmaker's style: where the essayistic gestures of the previous period relied on "smooth transitions" between disparate materials, the films of this newly militant phase were "welded together by means of a violent accumulation of montage-assaults" in the manner of New Wave filmmaking techniques, with their "declamatory" rhetoric (515). Ivens first tried out this approach in his 1966 film *Le Ciel, la terre* and then pushed it even further in his contribution to the 1967 omnibus film *Far from Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*), featuring a who's who of the French New Wave, a film Waugh describes as noteworthy on various fronts: from the perspective of "the solidarity film, films about the Vietnam war, compendium films, the cinematic output of the French left in the era around May 1968" (518). Misunderstood, denounced, or simply ignored by US critics at festival screenings and in independent release, the film's English-language version remained out of circulation for most of forty years until a recent revival. This reception, however, hardly deterred Ivens, who completed another Vietnamese solidarity film, *The 17th Parallel: Vietnam in War* (*Le 17e Parallèle: la guerre du peuple*) in 1968 and then again in 1970 with *The People and Their Guns* (*Le Peuple et ses fusils*), a film focusing on the bombing of neighbouring Laos and its resistant peasant villagers.

Readers who bog down in earlier chapters should not miss this section of the book, which contains some of Waugh's best lines and most trenchant, impatient commentary on academic film culture in New York and other intellectual capitals of the 1970s and 80s, while providing a platform for his final consideration of Ivens's last great project, his twelve-film anthology of works about contemporary China in the period of the Cultural Revolution. Capturing once more the rhythm of Ivens's seemingly inexhaustible energy for radical mythmaking, Waugh writes:

> Throughout Ivens's entire career, it was a customary, no doubt instinctual reflex for him to pause after a cycle of films on liberation struggles and turn to the subject of economic and social struggles in a new peacetime setting. So it was inevitable that Ivens, the anti-imperialist combatant under the bombs in Southeast Asia, would shift gears and sooner or later show up once again in China as Ivens, the poet of socialist construction. (574)

Although this paragraph leaves us still nearly a hundred pages from Waugh's conclusion, it can suffice as a point of summary for this epic, vital account of one of the magisterial lives in the long, largely still unwritten history of radical documentary filmmaking.

Acknowledgment

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Jonathan Kahana (1966–2019) was Professor of Film & Digital Media at the University of California Santa Cruz. Kahana is the author of *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* and the editor of *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*.