Joris Ivens: Indonesia Calling
Director: John Hughes
Interview: John Hughes
See http://www.ivens.it

The film completes a trilogy of films about the interface of filmmaking and communism in Australia during the mid-20th century. This is a subject that spurred Hughes' working life. The first part of the trilogy, Film Work (1981), rediscovered the work of the Waterside Worker's Federation Film Unit. The second film is The Archive Project (2006), where Hughes rediscovered the work of the politically radical Indonesian Realist Film Unit. This final episode in the trilogy pays homage to a filmmaker that John Hughes proudly admires: Joris Ivens.

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INTERVIEW: JOHN HUGHES

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Why did you decide to make a film about Joris Ivens?

It didn't start with wanting to make a film on Joris Ivens. I wouldn't presume to make a film about the "work" of Joris Ivens. [He laughs]. It's more about the specific instances of Indonesia Calling. But, I suppose what you'd admire about the work of Joris Ivens, in general, is his amazing commitment and engagement with what's going on in any number of moments in history. He was the one who made the strongest and most effective film about the Spanish Civil War in 1936. He was the one who made the film about the Chinese resistance to Japanese invasions of China in the late 1930s. He was the one who made some of the strongest work about the American war in Vietnam and so on.

And that's what you like about his work. That he takes on these issues? Yes, but also the skill with which they were engaged. The work is very strong.

In the structure of your film Joris Ivens: Indonesia Calling, have you quite early on. It didn't disturb me that he died first and then we found out about him. But I wondered why you decided to do that?

Yes. I originally went for the funeral at the very beginning of the film. But in fact, in order for him to... from... die sacrificially, we have to actually establish what he has done. So you see an excerpt from The Bridge and from Rain. We have established the idea that Ivens is a famous filmmaker, and then he dies. Part of the reason for using the funeral scene is that you get "product endorsement" [laughs] about Joris Ivens from a range of significant figures, whether you know them or not. Because they are on television and they are quoted you gather that we are dealing with a world-famous celebrity of some kind. An artistic celebrity that is important and is to be buried in Paris.

Let's talk a bit about your own work. Making documentaries is not an easy career choice. Can you spend your life being a filmmaker, or is it almost impossible?

I'll say both.

About the change in your own work over the years?

I think it is gradually getting better. [He laughs]. But it's still too long, a lot of it is still too long. And it's still very arduous. Very minority audience work. I don't think that necessarily a bad thing, but it's not a popular thing to be doing at the moment.

My film work is often about using found material and building a collage with them so you have the capacity to create a spectator in a temporal way. You build in ideas and an image in relation is the next. Illustrating, enhancing or playing with whatever material that you're delivering in an audio track. But you also have the capacity to build those montages in the form of a collage. It gives a denser complexity. And in theory it generates a spectator experience which is more active. The spectator is positioned as a more active reader of the material.
On Ivens: He was the one who made the strongest and most effective film about the Spanish Civil War in 1936. He's the one who made the film about the Chinese resistance to Japanese invasions of China in the late 1930s. He's the one who made some of the strongest work about the American war in Vietnam and so on.

The making of Indonesia Calling was enveloped in the politics of the cold war and the breakdown of colonial power. John Hughes is a thorough researcher and he has tracked down every lead to reveal events as they satisfied. But the film is not a piece of docu-note. Hughes has a unique film style. He layers images and text using a Dadaist technique to provoke a critical reading of the film. This makes his films complex to watch because they work outside a familiar film language and do not meet our expectations.

Many documentary filmmakers will challenge the audience with their message, but not as many will challenge with the medium. Hughes likes to challenge the viewer on all levels.

Because the layers of the images in Hughes's films are designed to provoke rather than synthesise it means that his films are not "easy" to watch. As a result Hughes's films can confound the viewer with the continual barrage of visual information. I find that Hughes's films are best watched twice. The first time to get your head around the film language and the second time to watch it as a native speaker of that language.

Hughes's use of his Dadaist screen design relates to his partnership with the Melbourne-based editor Uri Miralis. Hughes gives credit to Miralis for his involvement in the creation of his screen style. Hughes's use of a complex screen design has not completely replaced his earlier fascination with objects as metaphor. In Joris Ivens: Indonesia Calling, Hughes filmed street market artisans in Paris performing with a glass ball. His focus on the glass ball can be read as symbolising the elusive relationship of a filmmaker, specifically Joris Ivens, to light and image, or on the filmmaker's role as a lens sharing a light on society's darkest parts. As in his earlier works, the layers of meaning come from the various readings of the objects within the film's montage, rather than the layering of images on top of each other.

The Joris Ivens Documentary Film Festival had a Joris Ivens retrospective this autumn, and also a seminar with his son and working partner Maurice Lourdes Ivens.

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