

# Dadaist screen design

John Hughes admires Joris Ivens for his ability to make effective films on history. Now Ivens' *Indonesia Calling* has fallen into his neo-dadaist hands. Hughes' 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. TEXT **CATHERINE GOUGH-BRADY**

## **Joris Ivens: Indonesia Calling**

Director: John Hughes, Australia.  
See <http://www.iven.nl>



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 spans Hughes' working life. The first part of the trilogy, *Film Work*

(1981), rediscovered the work of the Waterside Worker's Federation's Film Unit. The second film is *The Archive Project* (2006), where Hughes rediscovered the work of the politically radical Melbourne Realist Film Unit. This final episode in the trilogy pays homage to a filmmaker that John Hughes greatly admires: Joris Ivens.



**It may surprise you** to find out that Joris Ivens came to Australia in 1945 to take the position of The Dutch East Indies Film Commissioner. At

the time, the Japanese had invaded the East Indies and the Dutch government of this Southeast Asian nation was in exile in Australia.

Australian neo-Dadaist filmmaker John Hughes has researched Ivens' stay in Australia and made a documentary about this time and about the creation of Ivens' classic film *Indonesia Calling*. It turns out that the making of *Indonesia Calling* is shrouded in mystery.

Hughes reveals that Ivens originally intended to make an official film about the return of the exiled government to the East Indies, but it became impossible. His attempts to enter both the Dutch East Indies (now known as Indonesia) and the

Philippines was blocked by the Americans, who considered him a communist spy. Ivens' efforts were also stymied by historical events: Indonesia had just declared independence from the Netherlands. If the Dutch government returned it would be to reinforce colonial rule, not an ideology that Ivens was comfortable with.

Faced with the impossibility of making the original film, Ivens resigned his post as Film Commissioner. He began to make a film about the support of the Indonesian independence movement by Australian waterside workers. The Waterside Workers' Union was known for its ability to push agendas and for its radical foreign policy. When motivated, the Australian waterside workers, known as "wharfies", had the power to control all of Australia's import and export, which gave them considerable clout. Their constant contact with people from all around the world also meant that they were far more tolerant and

## INTERVIEW: **JOHN HUGHES**

### Minority audience work

– 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 its 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'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.

– And that's what you like about

his work? That he takes on those 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*, Ivens dies 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 put the funeral at the very beginning of the film. But in fact, in order for him to ... hmmm ... die satisfactorily, 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'd say both.

– Both?

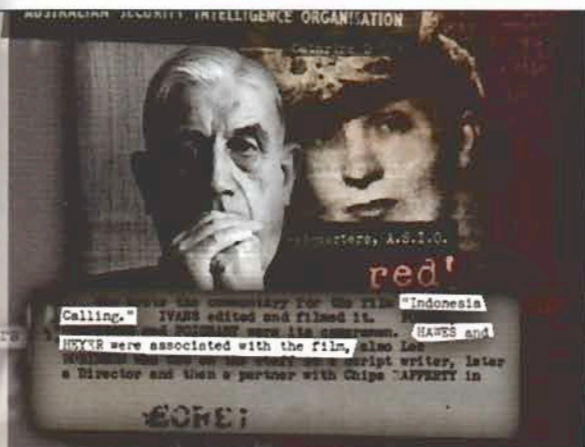
– Oh yeah. It's possible, of course it's possible. I've been fortunate in that I've been able to... [John stops and thinks and starts again]. I haven't been able to make all the work that I would have liked to make. There are boxes of projects that have never been made, and will never be made. But on the other hand, all the work that I have made I've made because I've wanted to.

– Do you see a 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 arcane. Very minority audience work. I don't think that's 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 collages with them so you have the capacity to engage a spectator in a temporal way. You build an idea and an image in relation to 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 it 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.**

international than the average, often racist and isolationist, Australian. They had no problem supporting the Asian Indonesian independence movement against the Dutch colonial power.

According to director Hughes, a number of international filmmakers who found themselves in Australia at the time, like Harry Watt and Axel Poignant, helped Ivens to create *Indonesia Calling*. It became a collaborative effort. In the blackballing era of the cold war, hardly anyone was willing to admit that they worked on the film, but they were happy to help "under the radar". Kodak was told to refuse to supply film stock to Ivens – so others, including returned soldiers, and possibly the head of the Australian government film agency, secretly donated film stock. Australia's intelligence agency, ASIO, was tracking the film's production through reports from cab drivers and gossip, but even they could not nail who was involved.

One of the people who did not hide her involvement was Catherine Duncan. Duncan wrote the narrative for *Indonesia Calling*. John Hughes often "rediscovers" people forgotten by history. In *Joris Ivens: Indonesia Calling*, Catherine Duncan's formidable personality penetrates the screen.



**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 unfolded. But the film is not a piece of doc-noir. 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' films are designed to provoke rather than synthesise it means that his films are not "easy" to watch. As a result Hughes' films can confound the viewer with the continual barrage of visual information. I find that Hughes' 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' use of his Dadaist screen design relates to his partnership with the Melbourne-based editor Uri Mizrahi. Hughes gives credit to Mizrahi for his involvement in the creation of their screen style.

Hughes' 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 mime artists 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 shining 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 DOK-Leipzig Film Festival had a Joris Ivens retrospective this autumn, and also a seminar with his wife and working partner Marcelline Loridan-Ivens.*

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