

Joris Ivens and Australia

revisit

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Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia

Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia is Australian Writer-Director, John Hughes' visually beautiful, ground breaking documentary detailing the confusion, fear and surrealistic beginnings of an abrupt and contested end to an age of Netherlands *imperium*, and of the position that Ivens' film, *Indonesia Calling*, occupies in that interregnum. Hughes certainly takes the long road. Distilling the stories of Ivens' life, the historical background to decolonisation, and the making of *Indonesia Calling* into 90 minutes was always going to be a mammoth undertaking, even for a film-maker of Hughes' ability and sensibilities. However, as the resulting film shows, although Hughes was aware of the enormity of the task he was clearly undaunted by it.

It is obvious that an extensive amount of research and reflection underpinned and informed Hughes' methodology. *Indonesia Calling* was made in support of an autonomous, self-governing Indonesia, at a critical time when the Allies were engaged in the serious and unlovely business of attempting to gain control of the decolonisation process in the former Netherlands East Indies. On a larger stage, the film was at the vanguard of an emerging genre in post-war films dealing with decolonisation as Europe's colonial empires found their powers fragmented and diminished and struggled to negotiate the *realpolitiek* of the twin historical themes that emerged to dominate the post-war period, Decolonisation and Cold War World.

Here is where Hughes' grasp of the nuances of the topic and mastery of his craft ensure that while the viewer is made aware of the obstacles, rather than act as distractions they serve to complement the viewer's journey and draw the audience into the film as active participants in negotiating such complex and polarising topics. The structure of the film is created through interplay between a series of iterations which shift between interview, excerpts from *Indonesia Calling*, primary visual and document sources, and voiceover, which coalesce to construct a series of poetic metaphors and real life encounters with the key protagonists. The effect is to reduce the distance between Ivens and

his audience to produce a form of haptic imagery so that rather than using the screen as big canvas, the camera becomes an extension of Hughes' senses, and probes into the many layers of meaning associated with a liminal historical moment.

However, this approach can be Janus faced as the film does not conform to a familiar film language, and the result is that this is not an easy film to watch. The collaboration between Hughes and his Editor, Uri Mizrahi, puts one in mind of Claude Lévi Strauss's notion of the collision of disparate yet intersecting universal forces of nature, epitomised by the bricoleur and the engineer. There is an engagement with putting pre-existing things together in new and unfamiliar ways running in parallel with the procurement of the necessary tools and materials. The result does not arrive at a synthesis of ideas, but rather offers a layering of image and text to create meaning which is thick and dense in the fashion of symbolic anthropology.

Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia is a film that needed to be made and John Hughes and the Early Works team should receive high praise for their labours. Hughes does not shrink from rendering as antiquarian nit-picking, a persistent criticism of Ivens' use of recreated scenes, enabling the viewer to decide whether this matters given the much broader importance of the film and its place at that historical moment. Then there are the exquisite moments of absurd irony, such as the revelation that *Indonesia Calling* was being played in cinemas back to back with 'Gone with the Wind' in 1947 Republican held areas of Indonesia, during the bloody campaign leading to final recognition of Indonesian independence in 1949. Despite his self-deprecating comments that his work is too long, arcane, and minority audience work, I suspect that Hughes has elevated *Indonesia Calling* beyond the province of a partisan civil rights and labour audience to a larger and broader constituency. *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia* was nominated for the 2010 Foxtel Australian Documentary Prize, was the Winner of Best Documentary Public Broadcast, and is a nominee by the Australian Directors Guild for the award of best Documentary Feature, to be announced on September 23 at Star City in Sydney.

ROBERT HAMILTON



John Hughes, Filmstill
*Indonesia calling, Joris
Ivens and Australia, 2009.* ©
Early Works.

his career he encouraged new filmmakers to experiment with new forms of cinema. In this tradition we would like to curate a quality sur-

collaborations can be faster, cheaper and more easy be achieved. This stimulated the fusion various disciplines. It's reflected in the rise of

come multiple literate, we are used to more input from multiple (hybrid) media simultaneously. The organizations consider the cine-