

The Politics of Poetry: Joris Ivens's *Rain* and *The Spanish Earth*

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A film that is not steeped in human feeling is like a planet without atmosphere.

—Alexander Dovjenko

Of all of Joris Ivens's documentaries, *Rain* and *The Spanish Earth* stand out as the most exhibited, disseminated, and widely-known films of his oeuvre. These two works are often categorized as stylistically divergent, embodying fundamentally different ideologies while at the same time crystallizing the two strains present in the cinema of Ivens: the poetic versus the progressive, the observer versus the participant, the personal versus the public filmmaker, and the aesthetic versus the political activist. *Rain* (1929) is heavily identified with the avant-garde modernist film movement of the 1920's, while *The Spanish Earth* (1937) is an example of the leftist social documentary that characterized the 1930's. A comparison of the criticism leveled at these two films reveals their dialectical classification within film discourses: *Rain* is often disparaged for being purely artistic (i.e., for lacking a definitive ideology), while *The Spanish Earth* has often been cast as excessively ideologically committed and consequently, is often referred to as propaganda for the Republican cause. These opposing portrayals epitomize the debate concerning Joris Ivens's overarching style as a filmmaker: Is he a social realist or a lyric poet? According to some, there is a tension between these two modes of filmmaking across Ivens's body of work. Vsevolod Pudovkin circumscribes this conflict in a review of *Zuiderzee* (1930), what he considers to be Ivens's "first" politically driven film:

I was extremely surprised and happy that after his two previous rather formalist film essays, *Rain* and *Bridge*, Ivens's film *Zuiderzee* treats the draining of the Zuiderzee after the manner of reportage. With this film, he has made not just a step, but a leap forward. To begin with, he has overcome his earlier principles, which were those of an uncertain aesthetic, and he has passed to the cinematographic creation of "living realities."...Ivens's camera no longer slides superficially over life's phenomena. Here Ivens shows himself as a man who thinks concretely.¹

Yet Pudovkin risks obscuring the aesthetics and social practices that uniquely define Ivens as a filmmaker. Did this shift in subject matter entail an entirely different film

aesthetic, a rejection of his celebrated lyricism? In other words, does Ivens completely disavow the poetic approach he employs so effectively in *Rain* in favor of more realist and objective documentary style? I would contend the poetic is an ever-present and indispensable element that characterizes Ivens's work, and *The Spanish Earth* is just as poetically evocative as his earlier, more experimental work. But even though this poetic mode persists in Ivens's *The Spanish Earth*, it is not without certain significant changes and sophisticated nuances that reveal his growth as a filmmaker. To examine the evolution of the poetic within Ivens's work, specifically in the gap between *Rain* and *The Spanish Earth*, we must look at the films themselves, their production tactics, and the cultural discourses that surrounded and informed them. Ultimately, by reconciling the poetic and the political within Ivens's work, we will come to a better understanding of the power behind his particular brand of filmmaking, in which aesthetics and ideology are not opposed forces but are indispensable elements in creating moving and politically-galvanizing films.

In identifying a propensity towards oversimplification in some film criticism, I do not mean to reassert some sort of mythical purity of form unified under the guise of an all-knowing *auteur*. Rather, I am interested in the ways Ivens's poetic inflection of the documentary form can heighten the spectator's consciousness of both film language and the political symbolism that organizes public life. It is especially important within film scholarship to acknowledge the persistence of the poetic in Ivens's career following *Rain*, because the shift within his films is considered emblematic of the shift within documentary filmmaking as a whole.² Disregarding the unavoidable generalizations that occur by having one filmmaker personify not one, but two, film movements, and the emphatic formal reappearance of the shorter, abstract *ciné-poème* in later films such as *La Seine Rencontré a Paris* (1957), and *Le Mistral* (1965), even Ivens endorses the viewpoint that his work underwent a significant turning point with the making of his film *Borinage* (1933):

Before that I made *Rain*, *The Bridge*, and *The Breakers*, films without much content. I'm speaking not only of social content, but also of human relations. They were esthetic films, very beautiful, and I learned my craft, but after four years I saw that it was a dead end street. I saw that content, especially in the documentary film, had to mean social content. That social content, in a stronger situation, becomes political content, and in an even stronger situation, becomes militant.³

Reisland Delmar, *Joris Ivens: 50 Years of Filmmaking* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 20.

² Charles Musser, "Engaging With Reality," *Oxford History of World Cinema*, Ed. Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 322.

³ Deborah Shaffer, "Fifty Years of Political Filmmaking: An Interview with Joris Ivens," *Celluloid Power*, Ed. David Platt (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1992), 293.

The content of *Rain*, is of course just that: it is “devoted to replicating the filmmaker’s experience of rainfall on the city of Amsterdam.”⁴ It is just that, and therefore so much more: it emerges as an astonishing example of a film that concerns a primitive subject and its intersection with the modern world. *Rain* upstages the form of the city in this poetic evocation of nature: the film primarily focuses on the movement of light on water, the interaction of water with the urban landscape, and its changes over time. Particularly, the play of light on water creates refractions of the most limpid beauty, as does the movement of water over surfaces (a window, asphalt). The patterns created by rain become abstractions, as our sense of perspective literally dissolves in water and we are left with nothing but ephemera, that is to say, the non-existent “shape” of water. This is a film of ineffable splendor, and one equates the multitudes of raindrops with the crowds of people (the natural element with the natural by-product of the city); however, the obverse is not so clear.

The shortcoming of *Rain*, or its tragic flaw as a political film, is that it offers no framework for political interaction, and thus no space for human agency. The failure of *Rain* to adequately figure social relationships has its origin in the incommunicability of the gesture that characterizes an utterly “personal” film-language. *Rain* offers up a humanistic impression of the world paradoxically devoid of human interaction. According to theorist Georg Lukács, one’s personal identity and the meanings of one’s actions remain locked away, subjective and uncertain to others (as well as to oneself), when no connection is made with another human being.⁵

The limitations of *Rain* should not refute that the poetic form can be wielded as a powerful political tool. The rhetorical, or argumentative, potential of the poetic form is exploited in Ivens’s *The Spanish Earth*: an explicitly politicized yet poetic film whose aim is to express and heighten a shared political mentality, intensifying morale rather than converting people to its point of view. And indeed, the sheer number of left-leaning individuals that flocked to the cause of the Spanish Republic points to the ways in which the Spanish Civil War was a poeticized subject even before shooting of *The Spanish Earth* began. Spain was viewed as the last “primitive” European bastion that had not caved to an encroaching bourgeois mentality; the Spanish Republican cause, by being anticlerical, comparatively anarchist, and supportive of the breakdown of traditional sexual mores, was embraced by left-leaning artists and intellectuals across the Western world. While *The Spanish Earth* was

specifically targeted at an American audience and therefore is relatively free of acknowledged Communist sympathy, this sympathy cannot be denied in the works of other artists. However, the extent to which the Spanish Civil War was seen as a poetic, even artistic battle against the evils of Fascism must have influenced Ivens, who identified with an anti-establishment milieu and who was very much a member of an artistic, left-leaning community.

Ivens’s *The Spanish Earth* has since taken its place, along with Malraux’s *L’Espoir* (1945) and Esther Shub’s *Spain* (1939), as one of the premier films on the Spanish Civil War. The poetry that unites *Rain* and *The Spanish Earth* stems from Ivens’s filmmaking practices—his processes of production are very much rooted in interacting with the real world, and lyrically translating that real world into film. His cinema is based on an almost fanatical desire to catch life unaware, to capture it in all of its multi-faceted materializations. His description of rain-watching in order to get the footage for *Rain* unveils his methods of investigation:

At that time I lived with and for the rain. I tried to imagine how everything I saw would look in the rain and on the screen. It was part game, part obsession, part action. I had decided upon several places in the city I wanted to film and I organized a system of rain watchers, friends who would telephone me from certain sections of town when the rain effects I wanted appeared. I never moved without my camera—it was with me in the office, laboratory, street, train. I lived with it and when I slept it was on my bedside table so that if it was raining when I woke up I could film the studio window over my bed.... With the swiftly shifting rhythm and light of the rain, sometimes changing within a few seconds, my filming had to be defter and more spontaneous.⁶

Ivens’s descriptions of infatuated rain-watching are analogous to what he describes in his memoir as the “creative research” process that occurred during *The Spanish Earth*:

We would sit in inns and get acquainted with the citizens, the villagers, learning more than just their names and the names of their kids.... We took our cameras out into the street to photograph the first thing that appeared in front of our lenses...we made these trips to the front line to see everything.... In war photography you have to know when you should take a chance, risking your life and that of the cameraman.⁷

Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xviii.

Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, Trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 47.

⁶ Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (Berlin: Seven Seas Publishers, 1969), 36.

⁷ Ivens, 114–118.

Ivens is as passionate about the Spanish people as he is about photographing raindrops, although his interactions are qualitatively different: throughout *Rain* his interactions are with rain, light, and the city, whereas *The Spanish Earth* required interfacing with villagers and with soldiers and actually participating in battle. The filmmaking challenges are similar: when filming a village struck by war or a city struck by raindrops, the cameraman must be able to act quickly, in order to get a shot that could never be repeated. However, the stakes are considerably higher, for the reason that in *The Spanish Earth*, getting the shot involved risking his, and his camera crew's life. This level of dedication speaks to an utter commitment to making *The Spanish Earth*.

It is also fascinating to discern Ivens's switch between an individual ("I") to a collective ("we") approach that would characterize almost all of his later films. In *Rain* there are suggestions of the formation of a collective: Ivens's assembled rain-watchers stake out the city in order to "catch" the rain at its photogenic best. All of his friends are equal in this enterprise; distinctions such as status and class are no longer important. *The Spanish Earth* represents the apogee of this collective mentality, for it was in every sense a communal venture, from the group who financed it (Contemporary Historians, Inc., which included such distinguished figures as Archibald MacLeish, Lillian Hellman, and John Dos Passos) to the group who produced the film, which was just as notable: Ernest Hemingway provided the commentary and narration, while Helen van Dongen, John Ferno, Marc Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson aided in the production.

The strong narrative drive of *Rain* is echoed in *The Spanish Earth*, as the basic story of the villagers' project to irrigate the "dry and hard" soil in Fuentidueña is disrupted by constant Fascist attacks. However, countering the narrative structure of *The Spanish Earth* is the documentary's revolutionary experimental narration: Hemingway's stripped-down commentary vastly accentuates the poetic reverberations of the film, highlighting its associational sequences and the symbolic potential of the imagery. Ivens described the synchronization of the image and commentary as "a sort of awakening of the public's active relationship with the film,"⁸ in which images are used as the springboard for Hemingway's succinct literary style. The commentary is provocative in that it avoids the overdetermined quality of propaganda, instead providing simply a base for which the spectator is stimulated to form his own opinions. The voice-over complicates any expectations for a simple statement of politics, with its personal voice and its lyrical yet conversational presentation. Hemingway's voice is that of a poet attempting to incite and shape a political consciousness.

Hemingway's narration substantially contributes to the underlying poetic impetus of the film. *The Spanish Earth* capitalizes on not the valor of the Spanish people nor the exigency of their cause but the routinization of war and its enveloping of daily life. This emphasis on making the strangeness of war familiar to mundane existence is what is particularly poignant about *The Spanish Earth*, for it is simultaneously countering the traditional war narrative as it is making familiar the foreign culture of the Spanish people. What worked on the level of the aesthetic in *Rain* acquires ethical breadth in *The Spanish Earth*. The careful, ordinary observations that characterized *Rain* persist even here, as poetic anomalies that expose the constant terror of war.

Indeed what had shifted for Ivens was not his visual style but the focus of his camera and his commitment to his cause. In adding the human element, in steeping his subjects in human feelings, he was able to make the leap forward into politically-involved subject matter. Ivens is a filmmaker for whom politics, daily life, and poetry are thoroughly intertwined. But what then is the value of a film like *Rain*? Is it simply useful as a formative exercise for a developing artist, or can it be viewed as truly socially progressive as well? Can learning to look, to really observe, transform one's political consciousness? Must aesthetics emerge from a pre-existing ideology, or can aesthetics shape ideology? At what level does one conceptualize the process of social change? Knowledge of Ivens's artistic development on a personal, social, and political level allows us to account for the particular ways in which his films create meanings but that does not impose a false dividing line between poetry and public discourse. Then and only then can we identify the wealth of ways in which *Rain* nourishes *The Spanish Earth*, and the far-reaching impact that Joris Ivens's work has on our lives, and our way of living.

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⁸ Ivens, 128.