THE MAGAZINE

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‘Crisis? No crisis. Create!’

Erik van Lieshout and the re-creation of ‘Borinage’

It is amazing how precisely this personal animated film follows in the footsteps of the classic social documentary Borinage (1934) directed by Joris Ivens and Henri Storck. “This is my favourite scene; you can feel the intimacy of the miner’s house, the strikers, their children, living in great poverty and chaos. You can feel that these are real people.” The figures in the film are all made of simple wood sticks. The whole film is built in wooden scale models. The scenes alternate on a small wooden turntable (used as an editing table) each of which runs through to the next scene in the film. You can sometimes see the artist on the screen, when he is giving the turntable a little push. “Here you can see the scene of a miner’s funeral, like Ivens’ film incorporated, through the narrow opening of an alley. Because those were illegal shots, eh, it is all very literal, but abstract at the same time. The white sticks represent the miners, the black ones the police officers and the bailiff.” The end of the film shows the miners’ protest march with the painting of a somewhat cross-eyed Karl Marx in front. The painting had been replaced by a portrait of Core in Van Lieshout’s film. That is where it all started, with Core and an emotional moment in Van Lieshout’s life. Erik van Lieshout (1962, Deurne) is one of the most well-known Dutch contemporary artists and exhibits his work in important museums. He is known for his social art and political statements, which he combines with personal emotions and private situations. This also applies to his film Keine Kohle, keine Holz, part of a large installation consisting of many works on paper, inspired by Ivens’ Borinage. In April 2009, Van Lieshout and Suzanne, his manager and partner, stayed in Lisbon, Portugal. “When I actually go on holiday, maybe once every ten years? That is where I was, when I received a sudden phone call. My best friend and editor Core had been hospitalised, he had a large hole in his head, an abscess, it turned out to be a serious tumour. That same day I saw the attempt on Queen Beatrix’s life by Karst T. in the news; he tried to drive his car into the bus carrying the Dutch royal family at full speed. Quite coincidentally I saw the images of Borinage in the contemporary art museum in Porto. Such strong images about people going through a crisis! It deeply affected me. I immediately travelled back to the hospital in Rotterdam and removed the images of Borinage from seizing and selling it in a public auction.” Artist Erik van Lieshout explains his film from 2010 Keine Kohle, keine Holz by scene.
and wanted to make a film about Core. As Core was always responsible for editing my film shots, I too found myself in a bit of a crisis, greatly inconvenienced. How was I going to finish that film? I could have filmed Core in the hospital, wearing diapers and such, but that did not work. Then I looked over the film images from the Joris Ivens DVD box again. I must have seen the film Borinage about a hundred times. And I also studied Ivens’ other works. The only problem is that Ivens makes films, and that I, being a visual artist, need a three-dimensional form. So I copied the pictures from the film with black coal, as a study. And I made beautiful collages. He shows the drawings of the pitch-black slag heaps, the head of an old woman shovelling coal, the houses and the text boards from the silent film up on his laptop. Also sketches of the pictures from the film Komsomol, with reference to current events. “Here, you can see the head of Geert Wilders.” (The Dutch extreme right-wing politician) “Ivens filmed the gut feelings of those people, who found themselves in a crisis. I was also in a crisis and asked myself: “How will you overcome this?” Ivens took me to visit his Dutch contemporaries, like Gerrit Rietveld. Before that time, I had only been fascinated by the German tradition: Max Beckman, Martin Kippenberger, Georg Baselitz, Joseph Beuys, Albert Oehlen, German expressionism. Ivens opened my eyes to what the Dutch had to offer. I did not care much for Mondriaan and Rietveld in the past, but now I think they are great. I have combined the works of Ivens and Rietveld in the installation and the film Keine Kohle, kein Holz. I made a replica of the Zig-Zag chair, the cart and the sideboard, designed by Rietveld. Rietveld also lived in times of crisis and thought up an artistic solution. “Saw off everything from the bourgeoisie, all superfluous crap. And then you will be left with the essence. A crisis enables you to develop as an individual.”

So I was back to square one, because my editor was in the hospital! First I made my own editing table, a wooden platform with a wooden table. This is actually the exact opposite of the editing suites, which are nowadays all very high-tech. I had to go back to the essence, back to the origin. And with the camera, I took a one second image and then split that image in 2 frames in iMovie. Here you can see the cart towing out the coal residues. And there you have the rationalisation, the heaps of coal, which the miners could not reach. The film is largely projected, together with the wooden installations and the sketches in black conté chalk. These works were exhibited for the first time in the big Berlin gallery Guido W. Baudach. As of June 2nd 2012, this work, although a different scale will be used, will be exhibited at the Galerie Guido W. Baudach, Berlin, and is represented by Galerie Guido W. Baudach in Berlin and Galerie Kriitzinger in Vienna.

Van Gogh managed to overcome this personal crisis by making his first charcoal drawings of miners and decided to take up art in earnest, the start of a short and stormy career. When the film Borinage first premiered in New York in 1936, the New York Times wrote: “a strong dark film suggesting the early Van Gogh sketch from Le Borinage.” Thus, the work of Van Gogh with the deep black paint, by Ivens’ film echoed in a subsequent generation by Van Lieshout, who was, just like Van Gogh, from the same Brabant countryside. As Joris Ivens once said: “Everyone encounters his/her own Borinage in life, a moment that makes your life take a 180 degree turn.”
A gift of 239 Ivens' films

The Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv Berlin (Germany’s National Film Archive) has donated 239 Ivens films to the European Foundation Joris Ivens in Nijmegen. These film prints are mainly nitrate prints and date from the 1920s to the 1960s. Among them are classic titles such as Rain (1929), My Week with Marilyn (1931), New Earth (1933), Borinage (1934) and Indonésie Calling (1941). The Foundation will use these films for research purposes only, studying unique versions and images that are not in the present collection yet. Nitrate films are highly flammable, that is why these films are stored in special vaults in Amsterdam, owned by the EYE Netherlands Film Institute (the former Dutch Film Museum). The complete Ivens collection contains over 700 film prints, which were viewed and studied by the Ivens Foundation in previous years. André Stufkens, director of the European Foundation Joris Ivens: ‘We are very pleased with this acquisition. It is a proof of trust and appreciation that the Bundesarchiv gave these films to us. In previous years we have started reconstructing the most authentic versions of Ivens’ films. Twenty of them were released on the DVD box for which the Foundation received the “I Ciencia Ritrattiva Best DVD Award 2009” for the best restored films on DVD in the world. We consider it of great importance that the entire film collection of Joris Ivens films will be listed and described, including the history of their various versions and their reception. This collection brings us closer to that ideal.’

Photo archive digitized

The Foundation stores approximately 11,000 photos related to Joris Ivens’ life and work. These photos, mostly in black and white, have been scanned and digitized. The documents of the paper collection were already scanned some years ago and a number of films were restored and digitized in the process of making of the DVD box.

Ivens in Cuba

Last October, the third Dutch film week in Havana organized a tribute to Joris Ivens in which seven films, including his two Cuban films Carnet de viaje and Pueblo en armas, were screened. In this project, the Cinematheca de Cuba, Holland Film and the Dutch Embassy in Havana collaborated with the Foundation. The films were shown at the Cine Chaplin, the same film theatre Ivens had filmed when it was being built in 1960, for the opening sequence of his travelogue Travel Notebook (Carnet de Viaje), which was dedicated to Charlie Chaplin. Rehau Antonio Mason, the programmer of the cinema, asked the assistance of Olivia Buning in coordinating this retrospective. The Foundation contributed to this retrospective by making Spanish subtitles and providing posters for an exhibition.

The two Cuban films Ivens shot in 1960 bear witness to the hope and the excitement after the revolution.

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Joris Ivens returns to Valparaíso-Chile

The 13th Festival International de Cine Recabado (24-30 October) in Valparaíso organized a Joris Ivens programme, paying tribute to the filmmaker of…A Valparaíso (1956). Claude Brumel writes in a personal account: ‘The overall programme of the festival was dominated by internationalism and eclecticism, presenting documentaries with a special vision of reality or with happy or unhappy memories of filmmakers, such as Werner Schröter’s I Kalappa, Martin Sorocco’s Italianamerica or Samuel Leoni’s Ruggage. Festival director Alfredo Barria Tromposo presented the sessions with screenings in well arranged projections, enriched with the participation of the German composer and piano player Günter A. Buchwald. One day of the festival was dedicated to the oeuvre of Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens, organized in collaboration with the Cinemateque of the Universidad de Chile. On the closing day of the festival, enthusiastic spectators discovered or re-discovered Pour le Mistroi and Une Histoire de Vent, in the first session, Zuidereen, Borinage and Terre d’Espagne in the second, La Séine a rencontré Paris, Indonésie calling, Lettres de Chine, (Before Spring), Carnet de Voyage and Cuba, people arrived in the third session. An amazing detail of this programme was that most of these 35 mm prints were part of the history of…A Valparaíso. Joris Ivens had ordered these prints in 1956 from the filmarchive in East-Berlin to be sent to the university in Santiago as educational models for the film students he trained. The numerous questions posed by the audience inside and outside of the screening room, in the meeting spaces, gave me the opportunity to explain the life and works of the filmmakers, their historical and political context and the conditions during the shooting.

In between two projections, a visit to a house of Pablo Neruda on one of the seven hills of Valparaíso, provided me with the pleasure of admiring, from behind the desk of the great poet, the splendour of the immense bay, but also the pleasure of climbing and descending hills by means of the same cable-ways Joris Ivens had used and filmed. This stay once again gave me the happiness of noticing the global importance of the oeuvre of Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens, reflecting History and the expression of the memory of the 20th century. Thanks to the warm welcome, the competence and the kindness of the organization of the festival!

Joris Ivens in China

The China Film Archive organized a Joris Ivens & Marceline Loridan-Ivens retrospective in Beijing, attended by Marceline Loridan-Ivens, Qian Lize, former minister of the International Liaison Dept. of the CPC Central Committee and former president of the People’s Daily Publisher, Zhang Jianhua, team head of A Side of the Wind and Fu Hongxiong, director of the CFA, 28 October 2011.

Ivens and the workers photography movement

Ivens’ films Kusumomol, Borinage and The Spanish Earth were screened continuously during a major international exhibition on the history of the workers photography at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. Over a thousand pictures, magazines, books and films illustrated the importance of the workers photography pictures taken by well-known artists like Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson and John Heartfield, as well as pictures by anonymous photographers and snapshots.

According to curator Jorge Elbiata, the international workers photography represents a key moment in the history of photography. This movement, which emerged between the two world wars, has often been ignored, underemphasized or marginalized. This exhibition, catalogue and symposia, however, show that a new model of photography was introduced, one which was not based on a new modernist aesthetics, but that also provided new ways of production and distribution. Joris Ivens was the leading figure within the Dutch branch of the movement (known as ARFOT), although he never took photographs. His stays in Berlin, the Soviet Union and France had provided him with direct contact with the workers’ expressions of photography, and he was able to organize and stimulate young Dutch worker photographers. By means of his films and commissions he gave a twist of his own to this development of a serious alternative to the bourgeois photography, media and cultural world.

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Till 500: The Adventures of Till Eulenspiegel

Till Eulenspiegel celebrates his birthday. Five hundred years ago, the first printed copy about the many merry pranks of ‘Dyl’, based on folk tales and manuscripts dating back to the 14th and 15th century, was published. According to tradition, this Dyl was born around 1300 in Lower Saxony and died there after fifty years full of adventures. Many prints and as many versions soon followed and the buffoon who played practical jokes on his contemporaries developed into a much-read national hero in the centuries that followed. Dyl started out as a drifting, anticlerical and sometimes even nasty wet and turned into a more informal, cheerful and mocking jester.

In 1956, Joris Ivens and the French actor Gérard Philipe made the first film version of Tills’ life: Les avontures de Till l’ Espiègle (The Adventures of Till Eulenspiegel). The film has always been regarded as a weird and wonderful, or according to many critics a failed, step of a documentary filmmaker into the world of actors, fiction and feature film studio. That is probably why there can be little found about this project in the literature about Ivens. Meanwhile, the feature film has made a remarkable comeback: not as a feature film for adults, but as children’s film. The overdose of stereotypes, clichés and predictable jokes turn this story about the freedom fighter into a cinematic comic book that children can easily follow, like a historical ‘Spike and Suzy’.

This was, however, not the producers’ intention at that time. The initiators and makers wanted to create an exciting historical spectacle, able to compete with the Hollywood blockbusters. This is only one of the paradoxes, the film about Till is filled with those.

EYE Netherlands Film Institute opens new building

Directly across from Amsterdam’s Central Station, on the northern border of the river IJ, EYE will open its new accommodation. On April 5, 2012, EYE is the new name of the former Netherlands Film Museum. Starting from that day, visitors will be able to watch films on four screens, explore the exhibition area, the interactive basement, the museum store, and the restaurant and café. The new building, which looks like a flying seagull, was designed by the Vienna-based firm Delugan Meissl Associated Architects and houses four screens, 640 seats, and 1,200 square meters of exhibition space. The Film Museum was founded in 1946, and its first director, Jan de Vaal, starting from scratch, succeeded in creating a film archive with international acclaim in the course of 40 years. Its ever increasing collection of films, posters, film equipment, scripts, photos etc. needed more space. In 1972, the Netherlands Film Museum took up residence in the monumental Vondelpark Pavillon, in the city centre of Amsterdam. However, this accommodation also proved to be too small for all the activities employed. At a certain moment the Film Museum was an archipelago with n locations. According to the policy plan of EYE and its director Sandra den Hamer, they will initiate a Joris Ivens exhibition in the near future.

André Stufkens

Rens van Meegen

He started working for the Foundation in January 2008 as our coordinator of projects. He completed the project of installing panels with Wilhelm Ivens’s photos in the city centre of Nijmegen, he organized the Cine Poem Award, he made the subtitling for the Ivens DVD-box in various languages, he organized Eye & the City, the educational project in class rooms, and he assisted in various other projects. On 1 March, he and his family moved to the city of Haarlem. This ended his job at the Foundation. We want to thank him for his involvement and the pleasure of collaborating together.

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Till, the Belgian freedom fighter?

The French producer in 1928 decided not to make a film on the original German text, instead they used the famous version of the Belgian novelist Charles de Coster from 1867: ‘La légende d'Eulenspiegel’. In this classic in the world literature, Till's life is shifted from Germany to the southern part of the Low Countries and the struggle for freedom against Spanish rule in the 16th century instead of the coarse German rogue, who dropped his pants or fooled around with horse manure, and who would later become the King of Spain and cruel ruler of the Low Countries. After Till’s father Claws burned at the stake by Spanish soldiers, Till vows revenge: he shall throw and drive away the Spanish oppressor and the collaborating catholic clergymen at every occasion he gets. He battles side by side with the Zeugen, the guerrilla army consisting of Dutch farmers and fishermens, trying to hit the Spanish with all sorts of surprise attacks. De Coster's adaptation is not coincidental, but originates from the young Belgian nation's need for national heroes and a glorious past. Belgium was able to secede from the Netherlands after the revolution in 1830. Till as full-blooded Belgian resistance hero is naturally an anachronism: this state did not yet exist in the 16th century. And paradoxal to the nation's history, the countries remained until 1830 under Spanish rule and was largely catholic, whilst the Northern Netherlands had successfully claimed their independence from the south. What is more, a major part of the population had converted to Protestantism.

Flemish or German Till for a German film?

Due to the success of De Coster's novel, the popularity of the character Till was given an enormous impulse and it cleaned the road for many forms of use and abuse in the 20th century. Till was depicted in a humorous way on the signboards of pancake houses and restaurants. However, his caricatured image was also used for more sinister and less innocent advertising such as promoting ideological movements: ‘Till’ was broadcasted as the favourite TV character in Flemish national secession movement, as medeval hero of Nazi Germany or as socialist popular hero in communist countries. The identification with the 16th century, the century of freedom in the Low Countries. In De Coster's novel, Till is born in the Flemish city Damme in 1527, not coincidentally, from the young Belgian nation's need for national heroes and a glorious past. Belgium was able to secede from the Netherlands after the revolution in 1830. Till as full-blooded Belgian resistance hero is naturally an anachronism: this state did not yet exist in the 16th century. And paradoxal to the nation's history, the countries remained until 1830 under Spanish rule and was largely catholic, whilst the Northern Netherlands had successfully claimed their independence from the south. What is more, a major part of the population had converted to Protestantism.

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the film premiered in Paris, on November 7th 1956, the Soviet army invaded Hungary after months of unrest in various Warsaw Pact countries. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands arrested in an attempt to suppress the Hungarian Uprising. Out of anger over this brutal intervention, many western demonstrators attacked the offices and members of the communist parties. Suddenly, the public no longer saw Till as a freedom fighter who combated the oppressors in the West, but as someone who stood up against the oppressors in the communist East. The Spanish Fury in the film looked more like the violent Soviet regime, the Duke of Alba could be the Hungarian president, a puppet of the Moscow leaders and Till could serve as a model for the freedom fighter... . At shot 21 “Atmosphères de Breughel”, shot 24 “Breughel!”, shot 29 “Breughel”... Ivens’ conciliation towards the Netherlands was spoiled, since Ivens had been portrayed as ‘anti-Dutch’ and ‘a traitor of his country’ by the Dutch government and press after the film. Till would enable him to show everyone the positive depiction of William of Orange, the rebel leader and patriots drive, is an example of this. This founder of the Dutch royal family is brave and sympathetic in the film, although an antimonarchistic approach towards William would have been an obvious choice in left-wing circles. This anti-Orange attitude does reveal itself in the character Staalarm [Steel Arm], Orange’s general who led the army of mercenaries as a helpless weakling and caricatural idiot. Undoubtedly an attempt to make the Geuzen army’s heroism and the better Orange’s mercenaries only fought for money, whilst the Geuzen unselfishly fought for the freedom of their native country. Both the extras of the Geuzen’s guerrilla army as well as Orange’s army of mercenaries were played by soldiers from the East German Volksarmee, and workers from various factories.

Pro or anti-catholic?

The tricky part was the role that the catholic clergy men would play in the film. The original German text of Oudenspel had been published in the Index of the Catholic Church in 1730, but De Coster’s novel had not. In his novel, De Coster hereby strikes out at the persecution of heretics, makes a mockery out of indulgence and condemns the inquisition. These were after all generally accepted and even appreciated aspects of the Dutch battle for independence. This political struggle had after all simultaneously adopted the nature of a religious war between the Catholics and Catholic批发s in with the context of the Reformation in Europe. In the final script, the hard edges of the criticism on the Catholic Church were softened. Oudenspel had wielded a more obvious choice in left-wing circles. This anti-monarchistic approach towards William would have been a more obvious choice in left-wing circles. This anti-Orange attitude does reveal itself in the character Staalarm [Steel Arm], Orange’s general who led the army of mercenaries as a hopeless weakling and caricatural idiot. Undoubtedly an attempt to make the Geuzen army’s heroism and the better Orange’s mercenaries only fought for money, whilst the Geuzen unselfishly fought for the freedom of their native country. Both the extras of the Geuzen’s guerrilla army as well as Orange’s army of mercenaries were played by soldiers from the East German Volksarmee, and workers from various factories.

Dutch or anti-Dutch?

Similar to DEFA, reaching out for a partnership with the West, Ivens also was trying to build bridges: with France, becoming his home town till his death, and with his native country, The Netherlands, although he knew that he would not be able to go there. The subject itself lent itself perfectly for a chance of rapprochement. The Netherlands became a nation because of the battle for independence led by William of Orange against the Spanish yoke, as described in De Coster’s novel. Ivens was therefore eagerly looking for various opportunities to collaborate with the Dutch, even from behind the Iron Curtain. Just before there was mention of the Till film, Ivens had already attempted to make a DEFA film with the Dutch in East Berlin, despite visa and currency problems. Together with the writer Theun de Vries, he worked on a film script about the life of the 15th century philosopher Spinoza. De Vries’ story however never turned into a film, although the script was published many years later on. He must also have spoken to Ivens about Till Oudenspel, because De Vries had written the Dutch translation. Instead of De Vries the Dutch novelist Jan de Hartog was asked to write the scenario for the Till film. De Hartog had had international fame with his novels, but the script was rejected by Ivens and the DEFA dramatists, because it was too political. Perhaps Ivens had had a catholic upbringing, in all that—strengthen the involvement of the Dutch, Ivens had some famous Dutch artists as his director, such as Hans Kaart as lamme Goezak and Kitty Janssen as Nele… The set would have been a more obvious choice in left-wing circles. This anti-Orange attitude does reveal itself in the character Staalarm [Steel Arm], Orange’s general who led the army of mercenaries as a hopeless weakling and caricatural idiot. Undoubtedly an attempt to make the Geuzen army’s heroism and the better Orange’s mercenaries only fought for money, whilst the Geuzen unselfishly fought for the freedom of their native country. Both the extras of the Geuzen’s guerrilla army as well as Orange’s army of mercenaries were played by soldiers from the East German Volksarmee, and workers from various factories.

The rebel of Dutch film had returned after many merry adventures.

**Note:** This article is an excerpt from the book *De Vrijman*. It was translated and adapted by **Gérard Philipe, Willem Koch-Griep, William, Prince of Orange and Jan de Hartog**. Coll. JIA/EFJI.
The trousers with
Till Eulenspiegel
How the idea for the film originated.
‘I met Gérard Philippe two years ago in Paris, when he told me that he had been contemplating the idea of making a film for over six years, to which I responded that I had pondered the same idea all my life,’ is what Ivens told a journalist.1 It was the summer of 1947, in the conception as follows: ‘It was the summer of 1947, in the beginning of the 17th century is Till Eulenspiegel’s, because the Elm in Keitlingen (nowadays the municipality of Schöppenstedt) near Bernburg, Damme and Schöppenstedt. The building of this Elm is mentioned in various documents, to which Ivens responded that he had pondered the idea of making a film for over six years, to which Ivens responded that he had pondered the idea of making a film for over six years.

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The trousers with Till Eulenspiegel
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March 24th - June 19th 1956, Nice, France.

After a week of filming in the cold North, the crew moved to the hot film studios ‘de la Victorine’ in Nice, nearby the Mediterranean Sea. The place where Philippe had been the impromptu Fanfar in Fanfar la taille four years before. 

Even the palm trees, the village of Damme was put up, the palace of the Duke of Alba was erected a bit further on. Silence, shouts Philippe, who is in the middle of directing the action scene featuring the escape of the court jester Till from the castle. Behind the entrance gate of the castle you can hear the patterning of the Spanish horses’ hoofs on the cobblestones. Suddenly, a barrel of gunpowder explodes on the lift bridge, leaping are flying about. Till Eulenspiegel comes running up through the smoke. ‘Philippe’, shouts Joris and dives from the shattered bridge into the cool castle moat. 


The picturesque village of Tällberg is situated on the shores of Lake Siljan, about two hundred kilometres north of Stockholm and is very popular with tourists; the village has more hotel beds than inhabitants. The film crewe descended on hotel Dalecarlia. The simple authentic houses, from a distance and covered with snow, were an ideal location to shoot the film. A single wooden mobile house, which would have had its winter, the chase scene on the frozen canal of Damme, the snow scene with the church could not be shot there. That scene was shot later on at Lake Siljan at high temperatures using cotton snow. They did however place hundreds of pieces of scenery shaped like poleard willows and other types of trees on the frozen lake, where they had removed layers of snow to make it look like the canal that links Damme with Bruges. 

At full trot, Gérard Philippe sealed on his horse set off in pursuit of his Spanish adversary, who was out to kill William of Orange. It is however not clear how Philippe managed to find a horse so quickly on an otherwise empty snow plain."