The film ‘...A Valparaíso’ (1963), directed by the Dutch master of documentary, Joris Ivens, has become legendary in Chile. As Chileans, we are aware of its existence, but know little else about it and almost nothing regarding its intriguing visit to Chile. So now we started hensresearch at the film school of the University of Chile in Santiago de Chile.

When he came to Chile in 1962, invited by the Universidad de Chile to give a series of talks and show films, Ivens met with great interest. From the Centro de Cine Experimental, Ivens was at the high point of his career. His time in Chile produced a creative storm, which would engulp Pablo Neruda, Cristo Mark, Jaques Prévert, Raúl Ruiz, Sergio Bravo and Pedro Chaskel, and others.

Ivens’ relationships with Chile provides a chance to repair the damaged fabric of Chile’s cultural history. The military coup in 1973 brought an abrupt end to the creative flow of Chilean cinema and left analysts and critics to investigate aspects of the film. Therefore, Ivens’ relationship with Chile provides a chance to repair the Centro de Cine Experimental, Ivens was at the high point of his career. His time in Chile produced a creative storm, which would engulp Pablo Neruda, Cristo Mark, Jaques Prévert, Raúl Ruiz, Sergio Bravo and Pedro Chaskel, and others.

and the packages he sent, we were able to build a picture of what was happening during the 1960s and early 1970s pending. Therefore, Ivens’ visit provides a platform to investigate aspects of Chilean cinema during the 1960s and early 1970s.

When his visit was classified pages were discovered, including documents and notes handwritten by Ivens himself. These documents contained information, filming notes and production lists. Before us we had the genesis of the creation of ...A Valparaíso. Around the time that Ivens was making films from Canada sent by Patricio Guzmán Campos, one of the directors of photography on the film. It contained the final version of the film script for ...A Valparaíso. For the first time, information had been found that would allow the story of the creation of the film to be told and which would reveal its methodological and aesthetic reliefs.

But the surprises would not end there. We travelled to Holland and discovered the images. In the city of Nijmegen, in the archives of the European Foundation Joris Ivens, we found photographs of the filming in Valparaíso and letters showing the bond that Ivens maintained with Chilean film-makers, even well after his last visit to the country.

During the writing of this research, we began to understand that we were in the middle of an open area trying to establish bridges towards at least two cardinal points - the past and the future. The relevance of the film today stems from the fact that it was made in the tradition of the avant-garde, with the spirit of works which seek to explore rather than to keep to tried and tested forms. This makes sense to contemporary audiences, while, had you not made aware of the obstacles, rather than 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 voices that stand in contrast to each other, but the viewer is invited to decide whether this matters given the much broader importance of the film and its place at that historical moment in the world.
Hartmut Bitomsky is used to work with archival footage. Deutschlandbild (1981) is a compilation film that focuses on the contents of Nazi's culturefilms that preceded the feature films in German movie theatres between 1933 and 1945. The shorts reveal that men and women workers were idealized and optimism was the goal. We get to see healthy people with happy faces and without the militant parades and images of Hitler these classic lies are difficult to tackle. Bitomsky is working hard though, in this film, to show us the truth behind these images. Eager to dismantle it's effect he overloads us with narration: ‘This is a circumvention of their usage as documents, and as such, they are entrusted with a twofold function. They are supposed to show how fascism really was, they are supposed to say what fascism said at that time. The old message, once more. But this time, as a message of terror. […] And, simultaneously, they are supposed to testify against themselves, as one would do it with agents who defected and were turned. And they speak, and it is a fact that we still understand them. We are not confronted with some incomprehensible babble or stammering of a foreign language we cannot work out.’

The next Bitomsky film is Das Kino und der Wind und die Photographie (1991). It’s a kind of anthology of documentary film. The filmmaker and his staff inquire freely, from extracts to citations, on documentary images and their ‘truth’. We met The Lumiere brothers, Flaherty, Ivens, Robert Frank, Peter Nestler, Jean Vigo, Bunuel etc. All characteristics and prejudices against the genre of documentary pass but luckily Bitomsky’s reflections goes beyond the scholar clichés. Every topic is dealt with in an original and always entertaining and enlightening way. While the staff controls the video players the director lectures: ‘The Bridge, another film made by Ivens. It shows a levier bridge in careful details. Just like a draughtsman we would do before construction. Ivens developed a plan of the bridge and each detail represents a picture, a camera shot. It’s as if the bridge is being build before our eyes for the second time. This gave me the idea that a documentary does not represent truth. It shows us how reality is created. What we perceive is the creation of reality, the creation of a second reality.’

Not exactly… In the beginning, a few years ago, when the PIDE Archive rejected my request for authorization to film photographs of the political prisoners, I was far from understanding that this would lead to a new film beginning to take shape. In the face of my insistence, the management justified his refusal by invoking the ‘right of image’. Hence, to film the photographs, I would have to obtain the consent of each political prisoner individually. In the course of this, I spoke with dozens of political prisoners. Inevitably, I began to be drawn to their stories, sometimes accompanied by comments made about their own prisoner photographers. ‘Look at the jersey I’m wearing’, ‘Do you know why I’m smiling like that?’ ‘Have you seen my hair?’ I was embarked upon with a single certainty: that it is possible to tell the history of the regime just through those photos. For two reasons mainly: I don’t show the face of the former prisoners today. Instead, I give their presence in a different way precisely through this tiny sounds that nobody pay attention, this kind of noises that are understood as imperfections in a ‘straight’ film. Nevertheless, these kind of noises give us the physical presence, the body of the people that are talking. The second reason is that these noises, along with the noises from the environment (a dog barking, a car a plane, a lift, etc.) are creating the filmic space.

Ivens is known for being a political filmmaker. The position that you take in your film is clearly in favour of the political prisoners and against the tortures of the dictatorial regime. I don’t want to compare your politics with Ivens but when we talk about taking a political stance, my film was almost ignored by the Portuguese. What we are witnessing, as Fernando Rosas, one of the most important Portuguese historians, puts it: a struggle for the hegemony of the memory. In other words, a struggle about what will be considered ‘real history’ in the near future. As a matter of fact, there are two major opinions on the April 25th revolution and what it meant for Portuguese history. One camp says that revolution was an uprising against an authoritarian regime based on oppression, violence and control of people’s mind and therefore positive. The other group - and in my opinion this interpretation is especially now growing stronger and stronger – claims that the revolution interrupted a transitional process towards democratic society. And this group of people correspondingly denies the violent aspect of the 40 years of Portuguese fascism and wants to keep it buried in the past.

What drives you to take this one so strongly?

Portugal is undergoing a process of erasing the memory of the dictatorship. The political prisoners are in a kind of limbo; nobody speaks about them, or at least, only rarely. For me, this is urgent, to work with them where they are still alive. Tortures are not described in the documents that make part of the Political Police Archive (Arquivo PIDE (DCS)). Is your opinion shared by the Portuguese in general?

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In your film the images are very minimal. We only see the face of the victims at the moment their prison photo was taken by the PIDE. Why did you choose to use only this image and make a long film with it? Was it because of practical reasons that forced you to be creative? Maybe because the footage from the archive was too expensive to use, something that we have heard over and over again on this seminar, or did you have other reasons to work this way?

When I started making the film, I thought the voices had to be recorded as clean as possible. I even consider the possibility of recording the interviews in a studio. But a studio is never the ideal place to interview people specially the kind of interviews I use to do and also because of the subject. So I filmed in various locations according to the preference of the former prisoners. Throughout this process (filming, editing), I have been noticing that these noises that you refer to were fundamental.

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Construction and deconstruction

KOMSOMOL and ‘THE GIANT AND THE BUILDER’

Ivens first went to the USSR in 1930 and showed The Bridge, Rain, Pile Driving and Zuiderzee Works. While there he met numerous filmmaker and artists, like the graphic designer Valentine Kulagina (the wife of Gustav Klutsis), who even created a striking poster for Pile Driving and montage of several clippings with articles about Ivens’ films and Germaine Krull’s photos. There was mutual interest and influence: ‘Documentary filmmaker Efrîn’ [Shub] was deeply impressed by Ivens’ use of the Kinoappar, also her camera, and parallels can be drawn between his early work and her 1932 documentary K.S.É. (Komsomol – Chief of Electricity).’

Ivens left the USSR keen to return and make a film there. In planning his Soviet documentary film in late 1930, upon his return, Ivens visited many sites and made so many notes that the resulting epic script about the Komsomol and industrialization in the northern Caucasus, the Urals and Central Asia was deemed unworkable by the Mezhrabpom studio. In January 1931 the film director Vsevolod Pudovkin advised Ivens to narrow his focus. Shortly after this it was suggested that Ivens visit Magnitostroi, the blast furnace construction site at Magnitogorsk in the Urals. Also in January 1931, to coincide with the initial firing of the first blast furnace at Magnitostroi, the magazine ‘USSR in Construction’ published the photo series ‘The Giant and the Builder’. The innovative propaganda journal was published in English, German, French and Russian, and aimed to ‘reflect in photography the whole scope and variety of the construction work now going on in the USSR.’

The photographs were printed by retrogravure, which gave a rich texture and soft-focus, making the images appear dramatic. The journal included much statistical data, presented in the form of charts, maps and diagrams (a result of the USSR’s adoption in 1930 of Otto Neurath’s Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, the influence of which is also felt in Komsomol).

‘The Giant and the Builder’, created by the journalist Aleksandr Smolian, the photographer Maks Al’pert and the artist Nikolai Troitski, ran as a 40-page propagandistic, narrative, documentary and ‘staged’ photo series, with a striking combination of text and image. Conventional layouts of photos and captions feature alongside photomontages. The series was controversial when first published, but has been largely neglected since, despite being fascinating both ideologically and aesthetically.

Al’pert explains how he devised the narrative about Magnitostroi and Viktor Kalmykov. ‘The construction site impressed me greatly and I had the idea to show not only the birth of this ‘giant’, but also the ‘reconstruction’ of a person who had come to work there; a young man, with no education, training or ideological consciousness.

The photo series begins with images of the undeveloped land with primitive huts and peasants visible, then on p.4 the river is depicted, whose energy will be harnessed for the construction project, and on p.5 the young peasant Kalmykov is presented arriving on a crowded train in autumn 1930. The reader is told: ‘Together with many others Victor Kalmykov left for Magnitostroi to take up new work and plunge into a new life’, and it is constantly emphasized that Kalmykov is a type, an individual who represents countless young men from collectivized state farms. The rest of the series shows how Kalmykov learns to read and write, becomes politically conscious and joins the Party, marries, moves from a tent into barracks and then into a room, and finally is awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labour, and given a suit and tie, and is featured in the newspaper Magnitogorsk Worker. The caption of the final spread states: ‘Many thousands have followed the same course. A new man makes his appearance on the arena of history. Socialist construction creates this new man.’

The workers’ commitment is visually signified by a double-page spread on pp.34–35, which shows images of the blast furnace and the site to the left and the right of the field between the pages, and features the heads and shoulders of 11 exemplary workers flowing down from the top left of p.34 and across the bottom of both pages, in an L-shape. Each has his name and position written below him, Kalmykov is the last one at the bottom right of p.35. The top left hand corner of p.34 has the following heading: ‘Komsomol blast-furnace No.2 – the pride of Magnitostroi’, below which it says: ‘A brigade of komsomols (members of the Communist Youth League) who helped erect the furnace, manifested heroism and unbounded enthusiasm in their efforts to complete the job as soon as possible. They beat all world records in setting up blast furnaces. Work was carried on day and night.’ This, in essence, is Ivens’ Komsomol.

‘The Giant and the Builder’ is an important turning point for ‘USSR in Construction’, as it was conceived to be a ‘mobilizing’ photo series, intended to motivate and inspire readers to join the struggle for rapid industrialization, and to convince foreign delegations who ‘want to see specific documentary evidence, not merely agitational facts’. The photo series is a turning point in the way it was photographed too. Although it purports to be documentary some of the scenes were staged. In depicting the arrival of Kalmykov as an uneducated peasant, Al’pert asked the now literate and smartly dressed young man to put on the same old clothes he had got off the train in and pose for the camera. Al’pert was vehemently criticized for this by those who felt it undermined the authenticity of the piece, but he defended himself against accusations of falsification of reality by insisting that anyone can check that Kalmykov actually exists, anyone can find his address and can read about him in letters from his co-workers published in the newspaper ‘The Magnitogorsk Worker’ (Magnitogorski rabochiy) of 4th March 1932. The ‘reconstructed’ nature of the series is evident if one considers that the newspaper is dated 1932 and Kalmykov’s arrival 1930, yet the photographs were all taken in 1932. Al’pert was forced to defend his method of reconstructing reality for ideological ends, and the accusations reflect those Ivens was to face with Komsomol.

Around the time of ‘The Giant and the Builder’ publication, Ivens formed a collective to work on his film: a young
Russian, referred to simply as Andreev, became the crew’s engineer. His brigade competes with another to complete the blast furnace. He also learns to read and write, improves his knowledge of mathematics, helps to dig and create the foundation, then works on the blast furnace. He created a grand orchestral piece for the scenes in which the workers knew that the filmmakers loved their work there. He is illiterate and not a Party member, and the soundscape is a stylized hyphen between ‘radio’ and ‘appeal’ is a stylized zig-zag, radiating concentric circles symbolizing sound waves: the workers of Moscow! The Komsomols answer: In the time planned We will become a nation of automobiles and tractors. The Komsomols know that their production figures, as in ‘The Giant and the Builder’. Despite the enormous efforts, the two blast furnaces are not ready when intended, so in order to keep to the schedule the Komsomol decides on a ‘Giant of Komsomol’ mass production figure, as in ‘The Giant and the Builder’. Despite the enormous efforts, the two blast furnaces are not ready when intended. The workers sing patriotically ‘The Party gives us Steel! The Komsomols answer: In the time planned We will give you steel!’ and ‘Steel and blast furnaces are at work in every corner of the country, and the same breath. Kuzbas for coal and Magnitogorsk for ore. There are blackboards with shock workers production figures, as in ‘The Giant and the Builder’. Despite the enormous efforts, the two blast furnaces are not ready when intended, it was planned. We will give you steel!’ and ‘Steel and blast furnaces are at work in every corner of the country.

Ivens’ shots of the blast furnace, of smoke stacks and of production processes in action. With no warning an animated fantasy sequence shows how production could one day be, with little tractor being rhythmically and rapidly churning out in criss-crossing lines of motion. Again, this is a stylized scene, using a device which reflects a common practice in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, that of showing the future in the present. In one of the most famous construction novels, Valentin Kataev’s ‘Time, Forward!’ (1932), also centered around a day in the life of a shock worker brigade in Magnitogorsk as the men compete to break a record, one character looks down at the site from an airplane and sees it as a blueprint, unfurled. ‘He saw it as it would look a year hence.’

A Stalin quotation frequently referred to in ‘Time, Forward!’ appears to explain this scene: ‘We will follow the road to socialization. That road cannot be covered by the capitalist factory, and the socialist USSR, a classic “them and us” opposition, very common in Soviet art and journalism, fiction and documentary film. It was the first images of Glass factories with closed gates, and the caption that life is being extinguished there. Factories are followed by demonstrating strikers with banners supporting the USSR. The marching crowds are filmed from an extreme height to appear miniscule, as in Rodchenko’s work (particularly his photography of a record-breaking record-breaking construction jobs, and jobs of trumpeters filmed from below, identical in angle to his ‘Kalmykov’, ‘Magnitostroi’), rather than the sometimes strange spellings in the English version of the journal.

Ivens’ ‘The Giant and the Builder’ Ivens inserts the title: ‘Ishmakov’s brigade broke the American record with 540 rivets in one day.’ Later in the film there are similarly conventional propaganda titles: ‘At the Urals the river enthusiastic and heroic workers of Magnitostroi built a one-kilometre-long dike in only 150 days, and soon biggest blast furnaces are at work in every corner of the country, and the same breath. Kuzbas for coal and Magnitogorsk for ore. There are blackboards with shock workers production figures, as in ‘The Giant and the Builder’.

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CONTACT OF CONTEXT
The material is part of an ongoing interpretative and review of various sources about a film working, which examines Soviet fiction and documentary films still photographic, photographic, and posters on the theme of construction during the First Five Year Plan.

1 See Margaretta J. Boyum, ‘G citizen’s Kitchen. Photography and Documentary Film in the USSR during the First Five Year Plan, New York and Shadov, Georgia, 2004, p. 115-135. Tupitsyn is a professor of History (Russian History) at the University of Pennsylvania. The following is a list of all of his films.

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Since 2007 Studies in Documentary Film is a scholarly journal devoted to the history, theory, criticism and practice of documentary film. At the occasion of Ivens’s 110th anniversary a special issue on his works was published with a.o. an interesting personal view on the importance of documentary by the French director Jean-Luc Godard. The German version of the DVD box set including Stufkens’ accompanying book, launched at Ivens’ festival: ‘For the peoples who are raising ice-skating rebels, the general of the leader of the mass media, dominated by big media groups, the general of the leader of the revolt, William of Orange, is a drunken coward and fat catholic priests are selling their souls. This fact urged Dutch censors to prohibite release in The Netherlands! As a children's film it is still enjoyable and one can appreci...