

Willy Kessels, Filming *Borinage* at the shed of the Buize family at the 'Fonds du Roi Albert'. 1933. © Heirs Kessels. From left to right: Felicien Buize, cameraman François Rents, Henri Storck (in door opening), Joris Ivens and dr. Paul Hennebert (holding the window).

DURING THE CONTINUING RESEARCH FOR THE IVENS DVD BOX SET, ALL KIND OF PRINTS AND VERSIONS OF BORINAGE WERE STUDIED. ONE VERSION, A TWO-REEL CUTTING COPY OF BORINAGE, PROVED TO BE DIFFERENT FROM EXISTING VERSIONS. IT WAS ONE OF THE DISCOVERIES EMERGING FROM THE JORIS IVENS NITRATE PRESERVATION PROJECT AT THE NETHERLANDS FILM MUSEUM IN THE EARLY 1990S. IT DATED FROM THE LATE 1930S AND WAS KEPT IN THE VAULTS OF THE CINÉMATHEQUE FRANÇAISE¹. LASTING APPROXIMATELY 24 MINUTES, IT IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE THREE KNOWN VERSIONS:

- THE ORIGINAL SILENT FILM WITH FRENCH AND FLEMISH INTERTITLES RELEASED IN THE SPRING OF 1934
- THE RUSSIAN SOUND VERSION MADE BY JORIS IVENS AND RELEASED IN 1935
- THE VERSION PRODUCED BY HENRI STORCK IN THE EARLY 1960S, WITH A COMMENTARY BASED ON THE INTERTITLES OF THE SILENT VERSION, SPOKEN BY THE BELGIAN FILM CRITIC ANDRÉ THIRIFAYS.

BY BERT HOGENKAMP

BORINAGE FILM MYSTERY

The Cinémathèque version comprises large parts of the *Borinage* film, including some footage that cannot be found in any of the three other versions. But a considerable amount of archive footage from other sources is also used to put the events filmed by Ivens and Storck in a wider historical context, starting with the First World War and ending in 1936. This 'external' footage is normal frame, whereas most (but not all) of the material shot by Ivens and Storck is full frame.

Who made this version and with what purpose in mind? Why did it never get beyond the stage of a cutting copy? What kind of soundtrack was envisaged? These are a few of the questions that the copy raises. After its discovery Storck was presented with a VHS of the Cinémathèque version. He made clear that he had never seen it before and had no idea who had been behind the making of it. Ivens could not be asked, as he had already passed away by this time, but he never hinted at its existence in the many interviews that he gave during his lifetime.

Given its provenance it is likely that the Cinémathèque version was edited in Paris. As the editor(s) had access to footage that had not been used in the silent or the Russian versions, it is also likely that the Communist lawyer Jean Fonteyne was the source. During the shooting of *Borinage*, Fonteyne had acted as driver and general factotum for Ivens and Storck. He was a leading member of the International Labour Defence, who knew the *Borinage* coalfield extremely well as he had been a counsel for the defence of countless miners charged with strike and other offences. Occasionally

Fonteyne used his personal 16mm camera to record Ivens and Storck at work, and specifically when cameraman Rents was being asked for his identity papers by a police officer. Along with footage of a visit by French writer André Gide to the *Borinage* in 1935 and shots of the 1936 strike in the coalfield, this material would be incorporated into the silent film *Autour du Borinage* (Around the *Borinage*, 1933-36). Fonteyne had set up the company Education par l'Image (EPI) for the production and distribution of *Borinage*. He had been instrumental in getting the footage shot by Ivens and Storck to the Soviet Union for the Dutchman to make the Russian version. Even if it can be safely assumed that Fonteyne was involved, this still does not answer the question of the authorship of the Cinémathèque version. All the more reason to have a closer look at it.

The cutting copy starts with archive footage of the First World War, followed by the intertitle '1918'. A few shots symbolise peace and industrial progress. The title '1928' is followed by a shot of swirling water. As the shots and titles make clear, overproduction leads to crisis. After the title '1932' the first shots of *Borinage* are shown - milk being thrown away and wheat being burnt. The French and Flemish subtitles are proof that these shots have been taken from a print of the silent version. French footage showing the effects of unemployment is mixed with shots of the Hunger Marchers from *Borinage*. Then a newspaper is shown, the Parisian daily *l'Intransigeant* announcing that 'new factories have been occupied by the workers'. After the Ambridge sequence (the shooting of the striking steel workers by police and deputies), the film progresses in time to '1936'. A title announces: 'In the Belgian *Borinage*', followed by a map of Belgium and Northern France showing where the region is located. After a few shots showing the landscape of the *Borinage* with its pits and the garden village of Monobloc, the film switched to footage taken underground, followed by a funeral procession and coal stocks. The home coming of the young miner Delplanck is succeeded by the Mouffe family eating potatoes. There follows the meeting of the unemployed in a room, but without the newspaper cutting with a picture of Lenin on the wall. The gates of the pits are closed and the women take to the street with the banner 'rather death than the starving of our children'. This slogan is repeated in Dutch as a headline of *Het Volk*, the daily paper of the Dutch Labour Party. The card playing strikers who are evading the assembly ban are followed by the family leaving Monobloc in a lorry, including the shot of the mother breastfeeding her child. The eviction of Augustin Cage and family plus the trip to his in-laws is followed by shots of the auction of impounded goods in the market place of Frameries.

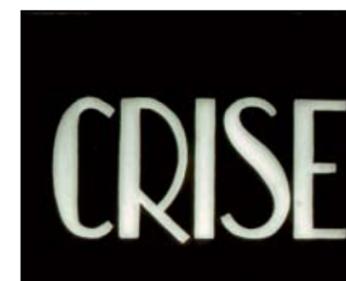
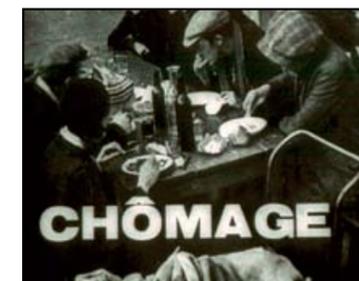
The second reel starts with the bailiff sequence which is edited differently - the second shot of the alarm clock is shown after the departure of the bailiff and his company. Felicien Buize and his family are shown living in a shack at the 'Fonds du Roi Albert', along with the unemployed Victor Dubois. Other shots of slum housing are succeeded by the construction of the church. Then the film returns to Monobloc, showing empty houses. From the child playing with the wooden doll, the socks full of holes on the washing line and the youngsters playing cards, the film switches to the Mouffe family, asleep on their makeshift beds. Doctor Hennebert examines the Mouffe children, while the father puts the table back in its place. The film returns to the Delplanck family with the mother putting her little daughter to bed and heating water on the stove. On top of the slagheap, men and women are looking for coal. In the

concluding sequence shots of water are interspersed with shots previously shown in the film.

The clearest distinction between the Cinémathèque version and the other three, is the absence of the Communist demonstration in Wasmes with the painting of Karl Marx. Other references to Communism have been left out too - the tombstone of Louis Tayenne, the slogan 'Front Unique' painted on the factory wall and, of course, the newspaper clipping with a picture of Lenin. In the closing sequence the overtly Communist shots (demonstrated by the portrait of Karl Marx, the picture of Lenin) have been replaced by shots of running and swirling water. One can assume that the accompanying text of the other versions - the dictatorship of the proletariat and the realisation that socialism was the only solution - was to be replaced by another, non-Communist message. Even the choice of the newspapers shown indicates a different political angle. Compared to the French Communist daily *L'Humanité* in the silent version, the Parisian *l'Intransigeant* was clearly mainstream. Even starker was the contrast between *Le Drapeau Rouge* and *Het Volk*, which was outright social democratic and anti-Soviet - and therefore despised by the Communists. The choice of the latter newspaper is intriguing anyway. Why show a Dutch language headline in a film which only uses French captions?

Interestingly, by omitting all references to Communism the Cinémathèque version started to look like the film Pierre Vermeyleen had had in mind in 1934. Vermeyleen, one of the film's financial backers, had suggested drastic changes in *Borinage* after the largely negative reception at its premiere. For without changes, Vermeyleen felt that the film's chances of making an impact were virtually nil - no one would show it. He suggested taking out the portrait

Stills from the mysterious version of *Borinage*, ca. 1938. Coll. Filmmuseum, Amsterdam.



Willy Kessels, Dr. Paul Hennebert lectures father and mother Buize about bottle milk feeding, 1933. © Heirs Kessels



of Lenin, as well as the demonstration in Wasmes with the painting of Karl Marx. As a former Communist candidate in the Borinage (for the 1929 Parliamentary elections) and a chairman of the Belgian section of the International Labour Defence, Vermeylen's views had to be reckoned with. Ivens, though, was prepared to make only one concession, to remove a series of no less than ten intertitles quoting the interventions in Parliament during the 1932 strike by the sole Communist MP Joseph Jacquemotte. But otherwise he was adamant that the film stayed the way it was. Despite serious doubts, Storck decided to concur with his co-director.

Other changes in the Cinémathèque version had no direct relationship with Communism. An interesting example is the alarm clock in the bailiff sequence. In the other versions it was used to show the time (6.55) when the workers started the occupation of the house and the time (8.35) when the bailiff gave up and left. In the Cinémathèque version the second shot of the alarm clock has been put after the departure of the bailiff. Next follows a shot of the workers drinking a pint of beer in a run-down pub. As it is now, the alarm clock seems to draw the spectators' attention rather to the hour that the workers are having a drink than to the patience that was required to oust the bailiff. Another re-editing technique used is the splitting up of sequences. The visit to the Mouffe family for example has been split in two and placed in different parts of the film. The same goes for the Delplanck and the Monobloc sequences. Why this is done remains a mystery.

Another important change in the Cinémathèque version concerns the chronological order. The film takes the viewers from the First World War to the year 1936 and then shows the events in the Borinage. There was a strike in that mining region in 1936, but it was rather different in character from



the defensive 1932 strike filmed by Ivens and Storck. For the 1936 strike was offensive, with such demands as trade union recognition, shorter hours and paid holidays – and it was successful in obtaining these demands. It was part of a nationwide strike movement that had started in the docks of Antwerp and coincided with the famous May-June factory occupations in France (to which the headline in *L'intransigeant* is referring). But there are no visible references to these offensive demands in the Cinémathèque version. The emphasis is on the poverty in the region. This is exemplified by the powerful sequence of men and women gleaning coal on the slagheaps, which is not only shown in full in the Cinémathèque version, but to which two extra shots not used in the silent version have been added at the end.

This brings us to the footage shot by Ivens and Storck present in the Cinémathèque version that cannot be found in the other versions of the film. There are ten such shots, all of them lasting only a few seconds. The most interesting are four shots showing the Buize family at the 'Fonds du Roi Albert'. In the first we see the mother cooking a meal. The interior of the shack is well known thanks to a series of still photographs taken by Willy Kessels. The second shot shows her and her husband locking documents in a drawer. It is only much later in the film that one sees them again examining the documents. The last shot is a close-up of the title deed for their shack. One can make out that the purchase price for their 'home' was no less than 2800 francs, payable in monthly instalments.

Such footage alone makes the Cinémathèque version worth preserving, even though it is only a cutting copy of a film that remained unfinished. But there is more - it is an example of the power of film editing, a historical document in its own right and above all... a mystery.



Bert Hogenkamp is a Media Historian at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. He also holds a professorship at Utrecht University. He has published a number of books on Ivens, including *De Borinage*, with Henri Storck, on film and the labour movement, and on the history of Dutch documentary film: 'De Nederlandse documentaire film 1920-1940'; 'De Documentaire Film 1945-1965'. Hogenkamp was also head advisor to the restoration project of the Joris Ivens Nitrate collection at the Film Museum in 1994 and rediscovered three Ivens films from 1930.

contemporary art inspired by ivens



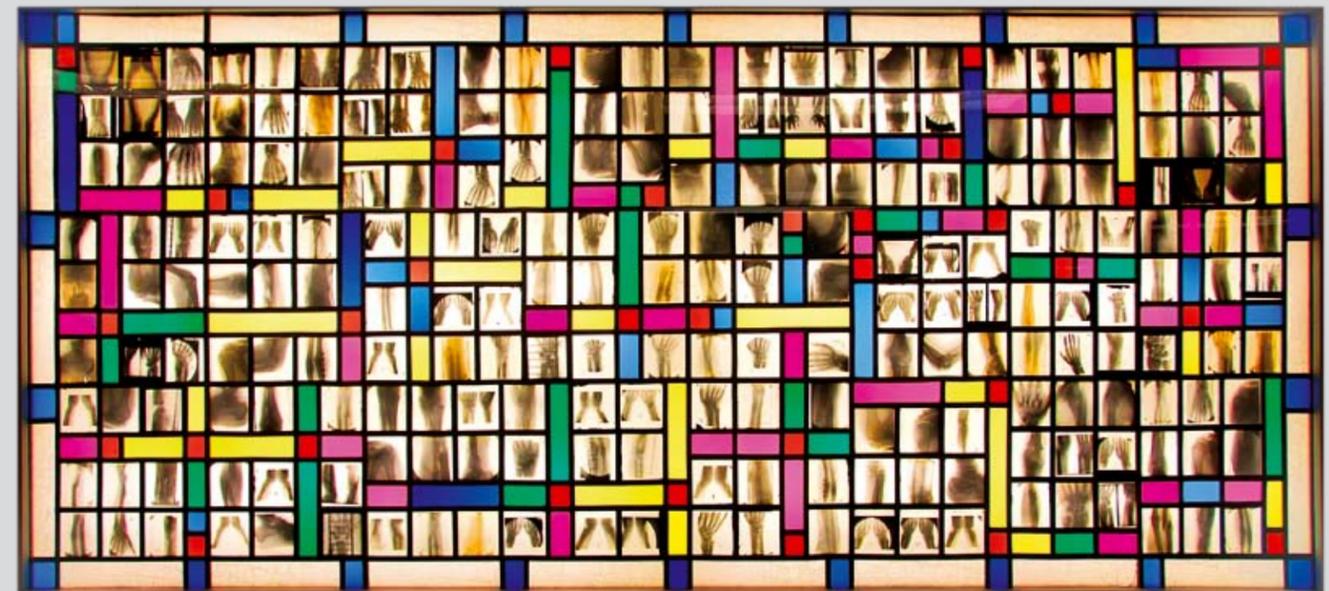
Judith van den Boom, *Bokaal* 2007, glass and pottery with glaze. © artist. The design is based on lenses and city life as characteristics of Joris Ivens oeuvre and his fellow townsmen / artists the Limbourg Brothers.

Bob Lejeune, *Joris Ivens*, ceramics, 2005. © artist



Redingenstraat Leuven, *Joris Ivens' Third Eye*, mixed media.

Art work with 218 X-Ray photos made by Kees Ivens, 2007 CWZ Hospital. Design and construction: Ben Sanders with clients Pompe Kliniek



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