

Jan Hin: learning from Joris Ivens and Hans Richter

On a late Saturday afternoon in the dark month of December 1927, the staff of the Capi photoshop in Amsterdam were surprised to see a customer dressed in a cassock enter the store. ¹ He asked to have a word with Joris Ivens, the son of Capi's owner C.A.P. Ivens, who was acting as the manager of the Amsterdam store. The customer in question was Jan Hin, or Ansgar Hin as he was known after entering the Schotenhof Benedictine Monastery near Antwerp. As Ivens was the technical advisor to the Dutch film society movement *Filmliga*, which had started its activities earlier in 1927, Hin felt that he was the man to direct his questions to. Earlier that day, Hin had attended the fourth matinee screening of the *Filmliga* in the Centraal film theatre in Amsterdam. It had reinforced his idea to start a *Filmliga* branch in Antwerp, and therefore he bombarded Ivens with all sorts of questions relating to this intention. Ivens referred the matter to *Filmliga* secretary Menno ter Braak. Although the idea of establishing a *Filmliga* branch in Antwerp came to nothing, Hin was to return to the Capi store in the near future.

Jan Hin was the fourth son of C.N. Hin, the owner of a large hosiery factory in Haarlem. A Gold medal winner (sailing) at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp with his brother Frans, Jan Hin wanted to escape the oppressive climate at his paternal home and find a satisfying future for himself. He therefore joined the Schotenhof monastery as a friar. However, at around the same time the cinema became his great passion. He went to cinemas in Antwerp, Brussels and Paris, taking copious notes of what he had seen, and read the few serious books on the subject that were available then, such as Léon Moussinac's *La Naissance du Cinéma* (1925). Once he had come to the conclusion that his efforts to show films made by others would come to nothing, he decided to make his own. He left Schotenhof, returned to the Netherlands, bought a 16mm film camera and started filming. Sailing, in particular the trips made with the *Beatrijs*, the ship owned by the Hin family, offered him the subject matter that he needed.

In March 1929 Hin thought that the time had come to ask an expert for an opinion on what he had made so far. For that reason he returned again to the Capi store in Amsterdam (this time without a cassock) and asked Ivens whether he was willing to have a look at his film *ZEILEN* (SAILING). In this 16mm film, Hin had made an effort to show the various activities on board the *Beatrijs* by means of unusual camera angles and editing techniques. Ivens asked Hin if he would mind leaving the film behind, enabling him to see it at leisure, and he would let him know what his opinion was – Hin agreed. A few days later the film was returned to Hin, with an accompanying letter: 'My compliments for various good shots in this film. With regard to the editing, this is quite a bit of a jumble. I hope that you don't mind my criticism. For I have not seen the essence of sailing. It is still a ship that is sailing, but not "sailing" itself.'² Undaunted by Ivens's criticism, Hin ordered a viewer from Capi so that he could study the images that he had shot more closely.³ Ivens encouraged him to continue his film activities:



Jan Hin, 1932

'I find it of the utmost importance that several people in Holland, who have been touched by the *feu sacré* of the cinema, continue their work and it is therefore my opinion that you must surely go on. Where further possibilities are awaiting I'm not sure. [...] To find work in a decently equipped studio, in whatever position and wherever it may be, would be the best solution.'

Paris and Berlin

Hin hoped to learn more about film production in Paris. In the French capital he met the Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy who had plans for a new film and was willing to involve the young Dutchman. Moholy-Nagy, a typographer, photographer and former teacher at the Bauhaus, had made a name in the Netherlands thanks to his contributions to the periodical magazine *i10*. The Hungarian introduced Hin to the Russian writer Ilja Ehrenburg (another regular contributor to *i10*), who was working on the script of a film

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with the title *SARDINIS*. It was going to be a feature film about the life of the sardine fishermen in Brittany. Ehrenburg would later elaborate this theme – with a more pessimistic ending compared to the film script – in his novel *Die heiligste Güter* (1931). The production company was the Berlin based Prometheus Film. That Prometheus was controlled by Communists did not seem to bother Hin. After Moholy-Nagy had promised to let him know when the shooting of the film would start, Hin returned to the Netherlands. A few weeks later the Hungarian informed him that 'the script was not yet complete' but that he hoped to make a start 'with the indoors shooting' in Berlin around the 10th June.⁵

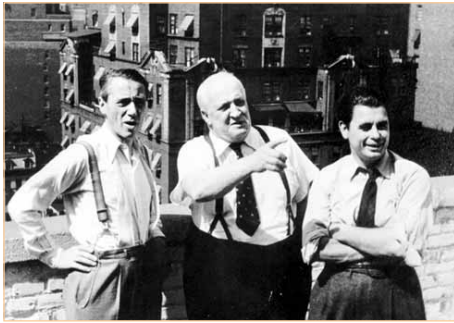
Therefore Hin travelled to the German capital in the second week of June 1929. However, upon his arrival he discovered that the Moholy-Nagy project had been further postponed. He applied for jobs with other film directors in Berlin and was lucky with Hans Richter. The two were not complete strangers, as Hin had corresponded with Richter in the Spring of 1928, while he was still at the Schotenhof Monastery. Richter was working on the production of a sound film, *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH*, in the Tobis Studios, which included some exterior filming at a fairground. With his 16mm camera, Hin shot the fairground in proper *avant-garde* style (using bird's-eye perspective, diagonals and unexpected camera-angles)⁶. The production lasted four weeks. Ivens was extremely interested in what Hin learned from it. But he entertained serious doubts about 'whether Richter can be fully trusted, artistically in particular.'⁷ Ivens hoped that the Prometheus production would proceed after all, the more so as he had recently met representatives of this company, who had travelled to Amsterdam and Rotterdam to shoot some material for the 'proletarian feature film' *JENSEITS DER STRASSE* (Leo Mittler, 1929). According to Ivens, the coming of sound was to blame as 'it has unsettled everything artistically, technically and financially.'⁹ Nevertheless he wanted to know from Hin all the ins and outs of the equipment used by Tobis for sound film recording.

On 25th July 1929, the premiere of *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH* took place in Baden-Baden. Richter had edited the fairground shots with captions, spoken text and music (composed by Walter Gronostay) into a kaleidoscopic film. Adhering to the *avant-garde*'s notions on sound film he had avoided any naturalistic use of sound. Tradition has it that some Nazis, present at the premiere in Baden-Baden, were extremely irritated by the modernist character of the film. As Richter was happy with Hin's contribution, he asked the Dutchman to stay on for another couple of weeks as an assistant on the production of *ZWEIGROSCHENZAUBER*, an advertising film for the *Kölnische Illustrierte Zeitung*. But by the end of August Hin found himself out of a job. The *SARDINIS*

project had finally collapsed altogether. Initially he was hoping to get a job in a film laboratory so as to acquaint himself with this side of the film profession but when Ivens invited him to come and work for him on 14th September 1929, Hin did not hesitate for one minute, even if the wages offered to him were minimal.¹⁰ Within a fortnight he was knocking on Ivens' door.

Assisting Ivens

The idea was for Hin to assist Ivens during the shooting and, later, the editing of *WIJ BOUWEN* (*WE ARE BUILDING*). This was a feature length documentary, commissioned by the Dutch construction workers' trade union (Algemene Nederlandse Bouwarbeidersbond). Ivens stated that: 'The central theme was the professional pride of the building workers. This was essentially the old guild idea: the pride and importance of a man who works with his hands, who builds factories,



Hans Richter, Robert Flaherty and Joris Ivens in New York, 1940. Photo Helen van Dongen Collection Joris Ivens Archive / EFJI

houses, schools and dams. The pride of labour in itself, in its results and its function in society, and the feeling of dignity, solidarity, and force that comes through that pride.¹¹ Ivens and his colleagues filmed, amongst others, pile driving (resulting in a short film, released separately as *HEIEN*), the work on the new headquarters of the *Telegraaf* newspaper in Amsterdam, and the building of the dykes to close off the Zuiderzee (also released as a separate film, *ZUIDERZEEWERKEN*). Hin was soon asked to take over part of the film on his own. This became the short film *IMPRESSIES UIT EEN STEENHOUWERIJ* (*IMPRESSIONS FROM A STONEMASONRY*), which was not included in the final version of *WIJ BOUWEN*, but was screened separately by the Filmliga early in 1930. A film critic of the *NRC* newspaper commended the film highly: 'The short film only contains a fugue of remarkable shots of machines, cutting through the frame, edited in an almost musical rhythm, rich in lights and shadows on the steel, on the stone and on the trickling water.'¹² While Ivens left for a lengthy trip through the Soviet Union after the premiere of *WIJ BOUWEN* in January 1930, he kept encouraging Hin through a number of letters, and even recommended which particular 35mm equipment to purchase.¹³

After his return in April 1930, Ivens had a job for Hin to do. He had sold a number of Dutch avant-garde films to the Russians. This transaction had to be dealt with by the Soviet Trade Delegation in Berlin. As he knew the Berlin film world only too well, Hin was the right man to travel to the German capital and take care of the production of the film prints for *DE BRUG* (*THE BRIDGE*, 1928), *REGEN* (*RAIN*, 1929), *ZUIDERZEEWERKEN* (1930), *HEIEN* (*PILE DRIVING*, 1929) and *MOL'S KRISTALLEN* (*CRYSTALS*, 1928) and their delivery to the Soviet Trade Delegation.¹⁴ It is not known whether Hin became aware of the escalating political situation in Berlin. But a year later he was directly confronted with it -

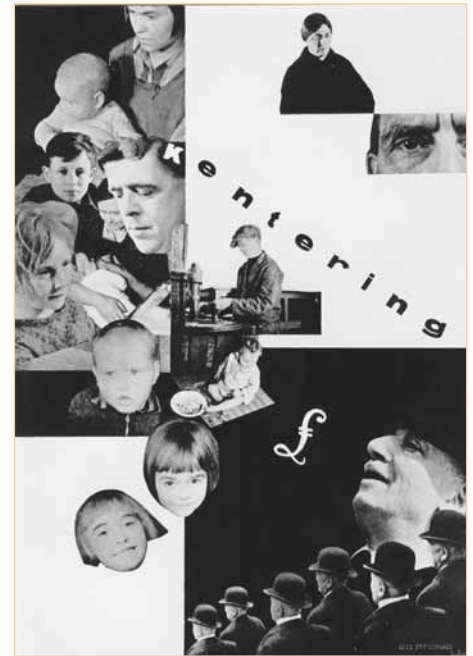
the Berliner with whom he had stayed in 1929 sent him a letter, in which he proudly announced that he had been appointed film critic of *Der Angriff*, a Nazi newspaper founded by Joseph Goebbels. Convinced that the Dutchman would appreciate this, he enclosed a cutting from *Der Angriff*, in which he praised the young filmmakers in the Netherlands, as they were making films without the help of 'Jewish businessmen.'¹⁵ However, it is doubtful whether Hin actually sent him the ten Guilders that he had asked for, in order to gain some respite from his creditors.

Studio Joris Ivens

When the Studio Joris Ivens was launched in the Autumn of 1930, Jan Hin was inevitably one of those involved. Other members included Capi staff members Helen van Dongen and Joop Huisken, free-lancers Willem Bon, Mark Kolthoff, Lou Lichtveld, Hans Wolf, Frans Dupont, John Fernhout, and the Frenchmen Eli Lotar and Jean Dréville. The idea for the Studio Ivens was that the name of the director of *THE BRIDGE* and *RAIN* would be a guarantee for quality in the eyes of potential commissioning bodies. The first client had already presented itself in the form of the Nederlandse Uitgeversbond (Dutch Association of Publishers), providing a commission to allow Willem Bon to direct *HET BOEK* (*THE BOOK*) soon after the Studio opened. There was talk of a Studio Ivens production that Hin would direct together with Ivens to cover the anniversary celebrations of the Union of Rotterdam Women Students, but for financial reasons the project was cancelled.¹⁶ But in June 1931 Capi asked Hin to help on a film about the Bouvigne Castle near Breda.¹⁷ During one of his trips, Capi sales representative Joop Huisken had a conversation with Professor L. Frenken, director of a centre for the catholic youth belonging to the Eucharistic Cross Association, where film shows were regularly held with projection equipment obtained from Capi. Professor Frenken told Huisken of the forthcoming consecration of the Bouvigne Castle near Breda as a holiday home for the Catholic Youth Movement KJV. He asked the Capi representative whether it would be possible to make a film of this event and how much this was going to cost. Back in Amsterdam, Huisken reported the matter to his superiors, who were immediately thinking of Hin as the person to make the film. Dr. Wim Ivens, Joris's brother, quoted 'an exceptionally low price' for the KJV.¹⁸

On 27th and 28th June 1931, Jan Hin, a catholic, and his Studio Ivens colleague Mark Kolthoff, a Communist, were in Breda to record both the activities prior to the event and the consecration itself. As many as 1,800 young girls had come from all parts of the Netherlands to add lustre to the event. A couple of weeks later Hin returned with his younger brother Toon to shoot some additional material. In August 1931, the KJV film was handed over to Professor Frenken. In half an hour the film showed that girls of different backgrounds belonged to the KJV, followed by coverage of the consecration and ending with footage of girls enjoying their holiday in Bouvigny Castle. The film adds little to the artistic legacy of Hin and Kolthoff, but one must assume that the KJV was happy with the result, as some months later a second print was ordered.¹⁹

In the meantime, Hin had also started a career as an independent filmmaker. The Catholic Association for Combating Tuberculosis 'Herwonnen Levenskracht'



Film poster for Jan Hin's *A Turn of Tide* (1932). Design Kees Strooband



Joris Ivens, Jan Hin and Helen van Dongen on a roof at Ivens' apartment Het Singel, Amsterdam



At home in the top of a mast of a sailing boat, climbing this fire ladder in order to film a demonstration of the Catholic Trade Union Movement in September 1931 posed no problem to Jan Hin



Jan shooting on his boat 'The White-tailed Eagle', (1936)

(Force of Life Regained) had asked him to make a film about its sanatorium Berg en Bosch near Apeldoorn. Capi helped him out with the lighting. Ivens felt committed to the project and encouraged Hin with remarks like: 'Why don't you put a sequence into the film where everything is seen from the point of view of the patients? Typically he only sees the ceiling and the upper parts of the bodies, the tree tops, etc. and when he gets well, the world returns back to its feet.'²⁰ Instead Hin decided for a more 'objective' approach, showing the different aspects of the sanatorium. The film *UIT BERG EN BOSCH* was released in 1931.

Catholic ideals

Collaborating with Ivens was crucial for Hin's development as a filmmaker. He was extremely supportive of the idea of a number of like minded people working collectively on a film production – exactly what was happening inside the Studio Ivens. But he wanted to use the collective approach for catholic ideals. Thanks to Ivens, Hin came into contact with a group of young Catholics around the literary magazine *De Gemeenschap (The Community)*. This monthly publication, founded in 1925, has been aptly characterised as 'a religious effort to renew the appearance of the earth by means of fire and artistic enthusiasm.'²¹ There were obvious parallels between the Filmliga movement and *De Gemeenschap*: both had come into existence as a result of a generation conflict and both exuded a remarkable determination concerning their activities. But there were also many personal links between the two bodies. For *De Gemeenschap*, it was a logical step for a catholic filmmaker to start applying the principles of the avant-garde cinema to a catholic film. Symbolically, in late 1931 Hin installed his film studio in the attic of the Oudegracht 55 in Utrecht, the same address where *De Gemeenschap* had its offices. In Utrecht he founded a catholic film collective named Hinfilm, where he was joined by four or five other members. Hinfilm produced a much admired feature length documentary for the Catholic Trade Union Movement called *KENTERING (A TURN OF TIDE, 1932)*, and managed to survive precariously for a couple of years on meagre commissions from other catholic organisations.

In the Spring of 1934 the financial situation of Hinfilm was so desperate that Jan Hin accepted an offer by the French Catholic production company FIAT Film to make a film in Paris. *KENTERING* had convinced Abbé Vachet, head of FIAT Film, that the Dutchman had the artistic qualities that his organisation badly needed. Hin started working on a film about the ordination of priests, *LE MARCHÉ VERS L'AUTEL (THE MARCH TO THE ALTAR)*. But it soon turned out that Hin's ideas about the film were completely different from Vachet's. In June he contacted Helen van Dongen, who was also staying in Paris, so that he could complain about his 'rotten job.' Ivens had left for Moscow in April, while Van Dongen had taken a temporary job with another of Hin's acquaintances - Hans Richter. However, the meeting did not take place, as she was fully occupied with the editing of Richter's film *DAILY LIFE* (although it would remain unfinished). Whether Hin agreed with her opinion of Richter ('a horrible person... with whom I have a quarrel every other day') remains a question to be answered.²² Van Dongen would soon leave for Moscow to join Ivens, whereas Hin would reach a compromise with Vachet 'that he would do the camerawork, in the sense, that he would only act as a technician.'²³

Hans Richter reappears

While Ivens would completely disappear from Hin's life, Hans Richter made an unexpected reappearance. In August 1935, Hin received a letter from Richter, who was in Switzerland having gone into exile from the Nazis, requesting that he assist him on a film commissioned by Philips.²⁴ Richter had already produced, with success, other films for the electronics giant in Eindhoven, *EUROPA RADIO (1931)* and *HALLO EVERYBODY (1933)*. The new film was to give the viewers an impression of the role played by electronics in modern society. Hence the title - *VOM BLITZ ZUM FERNSEHBILD (FROM LIGHTNING TO TELEVISION)*. Hin was offered 200 Dutch Guilders per month, a sum he could well use, as his financial position was still disastrous. The first thing he had to do was get a work permit for Richter. After Hitler had come to power in 1933, the Dutch Government had sharpened the rules. But thanks to a friend working for the Ministry of Social Affairs, Hin was able to get the coveted document for Richter. He arranged for the archive footage and stock shots that Richter needed and hired the Hungarian cameraman Andor von Barys to shoot the material in the Philips factories. In an avalanche of images and sounds *VOM BLITZ ZUM FERNSEHBILD* showed the role of Philips products in modern society. However, Hin is not mentioned in the film credits.

Chequered career

The film career of Jan Hin was a chequered one. Apart from *KENTERING*, he is probably best remembered for a film about a sailing race with the yacht 'Zeearend' (Sea Eagle) called *4.000 MIJL ONDER ZEIL (4,000 MILES UNDER SAIL, 1937)*, and thirdly, for his involvement in the *Nederlandse Werkgemeenschap voor Filmproductie*, a collective producing films about post-war reconstruction in 1945 and 1946. Between 1937 and 1945 and then again from 1950 until his untimely death in 1957 at the age of 58, he did not make any films at all, as he was forced to earn a living for his growing family in the Hin hosiery factories. Along with his friend and mentor, the film critic Janus van Domburg, he was responsible for the introduction of avant-garde aesthetics to the catholic world. In this he was greatly helped by what he had learnt from working with Ivens and Richter, and he always appreciated the fact that they had given him this opportunity to learn. For that reason he never expressed any regret about Ivens' espousal of Communism, nor did he blame Richter for failing to give him due credit for his contribution to *VOM BLITZ ZUM FERNSEHBILD*.

This article is based on extracts from *Jan Hin, filmmaker van het verlangen (Jan Hin, filmmaker of the desire)*, a publication by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Hilversum 2004.

See <http://www.beeldengeluid.nl/>

The publication includes a complete inventory of the Jan Hin papers, which have been deposited with the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision by his son Maarten (1944-2002). The European Foundation Joris Ivens holds photocopies of those Jan Hin papers that relate directly to Joris Ivens.

¹ Copy of a letter from Joris Ivens to Menno ter Braak, 15 December 1927, Hin-archive 4.04

² Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 13 March 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

³ Letter from CAPI to Jan Hin, 29 March 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

⁴ Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 5 April 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

⁵ Letter from Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to Jan Hin, 24 May 1929, Hin-archive 4.03

⁶ This footage has been preserved with the Filmmuseum: [hin-journaal], F 466

⁷ Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 4 July 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

⁸ Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 24 June 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

⁹ Jean Paul Goergen e.a. (ed.), Hans Richter. *Film ist Rhythmus*, Berlin: Freunde der deutsche Kinemathek, 2003, p.10

¹⁰ Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 14 September 1929, Hin-archive 4.04

¹¹ Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I*, Berlin: Seven Seas Books, 1969, pp.43-44

¹² Quoted in: *Filmliga*, vol.3 nr.4, January 1930, p.52

¹³ Letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, Odessa, 5 March 1930, Hin-archive 4.04. Ivens writes among others: 'How is your work? More certainty? [...] I hope that you will have work this Summer. [...] Early April I'll be back in Holland, and I'll give you advice on a camera. I saw some Askania's here, the latest models too. But my impression and that of others is: Debie L is better. 'If you have to buy one, take that one, don't order too many lenses, I want to give you oral advice on that matter.'

¹⁴ Notes by Jan Hin with regard to Berlin-trip; letters from Helen van Dongen to Jan Hin, 26 April 1930 and 6 May 1930; letter from Joris Ivens to Jan Hin, 1 May 1930, Hin-archive 4.04

¹⁵ Letter from Fritz Winter-Rudloff to Jan Hin, 5 May 1931, Hin-archive 4.03

¹⁶ *Nieuw Weekblad voor de Cinematografie*, 28 November 1930

¹⁷ Carbon copy of letter from Capi to Prof. L. Frenken, 8 June 1933, Hin-archive 4.04

¹⁸ Carbon copy of letter from Capi to Prof. L. Frenken, 14 July 1931, Hin-archive 4.04

¹⁹ Letter from Hinfilm to Prof. L. Frenken, 30 December 1931, Hin-archive 4.04

²⁰ Letter from Helen van Dongen to Jan Hin, 17 December 1930, Hin-archive 4.04

²¹ Letter from Jan Engelman to Jan Hin, 15 December 1929, Hin-archive 4.04. For Jan Engelman see Liesbeth Feikema, Roman Koot en Edwin Lucas (eds.), *Op gezang en vlees belust. Over leven, werk en stad van Jan Engelman*, Utrecht: Kwadraat, 2000

²² Letter from Helen van Dongen to Jan Hin, 24 June 1934, Hin-archief 4.04

²³ *De Tijd*, 24 november 1934, newspaper cutting, Hin-archive 6.08

²⁴ See the correspondence between Hans Richter and Jan Hin, August-December 1935, Hin-archive 4.02



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