

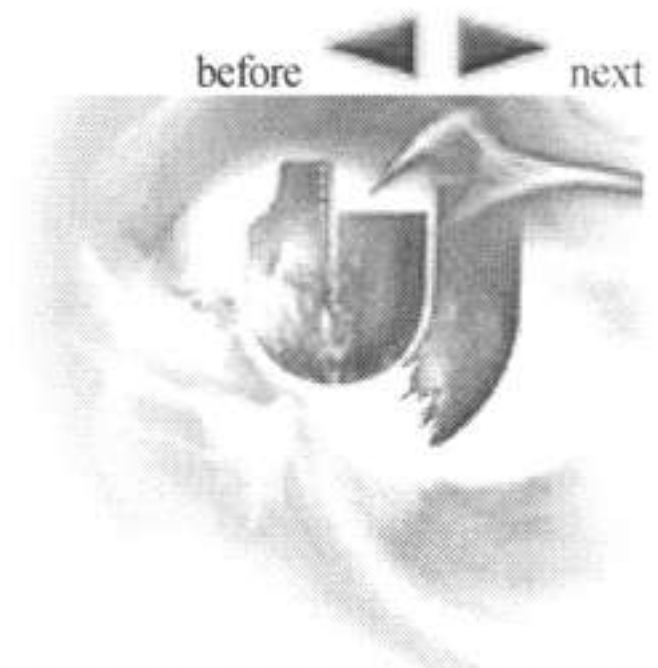
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Joris Ivens

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A Bird's Eye View of a Documentary Career

Kees Bakker

A few years after the birth of cinema, and just before the beginning of the twentieth century, George Henri Anton Ivens was born in Nijmegen on 18 November 1898. At thirteen he already made his first film *Wigwam* ("De Wigwam"), a story of Indians in which the whole family participated. For the time being Joris did not think of a career as a filmmaker; a job was in store for him in his father's growing and prospering photo business CAPI, and for this purpose he followed the necessary training: economics at the Higher Commercial College in Rotterdam and phototechnology in Berlin, as well as some apprenticeships with Ica, Zeiss, and Erneman.

In early 1928, while working for CAPI in Amsterdam, Joris Ivens began shooting *The Bridge* ("De Brug"). For him this film was, in the first place, a study in movement, composition, and film language. After its first performance the film was received with loud acclaim and was marked as an avant-garde masterpiece. Certainly after making *Rain* ("Regen") his reputation as a filmmaker was established. He received an assignment from the General Netherlands Construction Workers' Union to make a film on the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the union. *We Are Building* ("Wij Bouwen") is the first documentary series by Joris Ivens showing his involvement with the workers, even though it is still directed towards their

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work and not so much their way of living.

After *Philips Radio*, the first Dutch sound film, he made his first real social documentary with Henri Storck in 1934, *Borinage* ("Misère au Borinage"), about a miners' strike and the abominable living conditions of the workers in the Borinage. His social and political engagement appears in the treatment of *Zuiderzee*, which, together with the music of Hanns Eisler and the title *New Earth*, was given an explicitly political message. Joris Ivens had already represented his political beliefs in the socialist utopia in the film *Song of Heroes* ("Pesn o gerojach [Komsomol]," 1933). Co-operating with, among others, Eisler, who produced the soundtrack of the film, he made a film about the building up of the socialist Soviet state on the basis of the construction of the blast furnace town of Magnitogorsk by the Komsomol youth.

After a subsequent stay in the Soviet Union, Joris Ivens left for the United States in 1936 where, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Contemporary Historians, Inc., was established to enable the production of what was later to become *The Spanish Earth* (1937). Recorded at the republican front in Spain, this film is still seen as one of Ivens's most important works, characterized by powerful photography, editing, sober commentary by Ernest Hemingway, and clear partiality against Franco's fascism. A year later Ivens filmed the Sino-Japanese War (*The 400 Million*), and subsequently make a number of films on the United States themselves.

In this relatively short period in his film career, Joris Ivens had already put a clear mark on the documentary film and since that time he is generally regarded as one of the designers of this "movement" as the documentarists called it themselves. Besides Ivens having co-developed the language of the documentary, he continued to devote this medium to his ideals and the progress of society and against the repression of weaker groups. In spite of his communist sympathies Ivens was appointed by the Dutch government to film the liberation of Indonesia as Film Commissioner for the Dutch East Indies. However, in Ivens's opinion the

Netherlands were not liberating, but re-colonizing this country. He considered this a breach of contract on the side of the Dutch, resigned his position, and went on to make a filmic pamphlet against Dutch policy in Indonesia. *Indonesia Calling* (1946) meant a breach with the Netherlands: Ivens was considered persona non grata. This did not hamper his filmic work, however. He had already filmed in various corners of the world and was now given an assignment from Eastern Europe to film the reconstruction of the countries stricken by the Second World War, which were now on the brink of a socialist future (*The First Years* ["Pierwsze lata," 1949]). Till 1957 Joris Ivens continued to work in East Germany, making one of the largest productions in the history of the documentary film there (*Song of the Rivers*, ["Das Lied der Ströme," 1954]), but the films of this period were predominantly characterized by propaganda for communism, and less by his artistic qualities, in part because he was given less freedom to develop them.

In 1957 Joris Ivens returned to Western Europe and made the poetic *The Seine Meets Paris* ("La Seine a rencontré Paris") in France. This, however, did not mean a turning away from his political and social engagement, for his films that follow are characterized by an alternation of poetry and politics, and of free productions and commissioned films. In 1958 he made, while working as a lecturer at the Beijing Film Academy, both the poetic *Before Spring* and the political pamphlet *Six Hundred Million with You*. After a commissioned film for the Italian state oil company ENI (Italy Is Not a Poor Country ["L'Italia non e un paese povero," 1960]) he made both the pro-revolutionary *An Armed People* ("Pueblo armado"), as well as the more poetic travel letter to Charles Chaplin, *Travel Note* ("Carnet de viaje"), in Cuba (both from 1961). The sixties are characterized by these two extremes in his work as a filmmaker, for before starkly militant films about, among other things, Vietnam (such as *The Threatening Sky* ["Le Ciel, la terre," 1966] and *The 17th Parallel* ["Le Dix-septième parallèle," 1967], which he shot with Marceline Loridan), Ivens also made two special film poems: . . . *A Valparaiso* (1963) and *The Mistral* ("Pour le mistral," 1965).

His cooperation with Marceline Loridan began from this period and continued till his death in 1989. This cooperation resulted, among other things, in the monumental series lasting twelve hours, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* ("Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes," 1976), about the influence of the Cultural Revolution on everyday life in China. Together they made some more, important films, including the poetic, contemplative, sometimes ironic testamentary, *A Tale of the Wind* ("Une Histoire de vent," 1988). This was a highly praised pinnacle of his imposing oeuvre, which originated in five continents and witnessed the turbulent twentieth century.

The continuation of an oeuvre

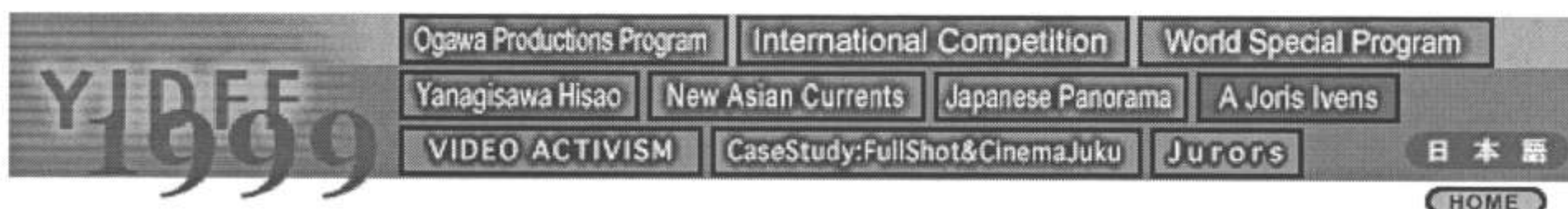
During his entire career as a filmmaker, Joris Ivens kept the papers that are produced when making a film. In accordance with Joris Ivens's desire to deposit his archives with an independent institution, the European Foundation Joris Ivens was established a year after his death, with the purpose of managing, inventorying, and opening up the Joris Ivens Archives. In 1995 the Foundation obtained the Archives: an impressive collection for one person, but also a very rich set of materials; it is a cross-section of documentary film history and of twentieth century socio-political history. The European Foundation Joris Ivens aims to open up and complete the archives and the collections it acquires, to preserve this part of documentary film history and make it available for students and researchers, journalists, writers, and filmmakers who want to know more about Joris Ivens, his role in film history, the events he witnessed and documented with his camera, and documentary cinema in general.

The European Foundation Joris Ivens tries to continue the work of Joris Ivens. Not by making films, but by keeping the films of Ivens alive and by stimulating people to see them and to think about the world Ivens filmed and the world he wanted to film. The Foundation wants to achieve this by, apart from making the Joris Ivens Archives available, organizing exhibitions, retrospectives, conferences, film programs, and other

activities that can stimulate people in understanding the moving twentieth century and the role of documentary film in reflecting this history.



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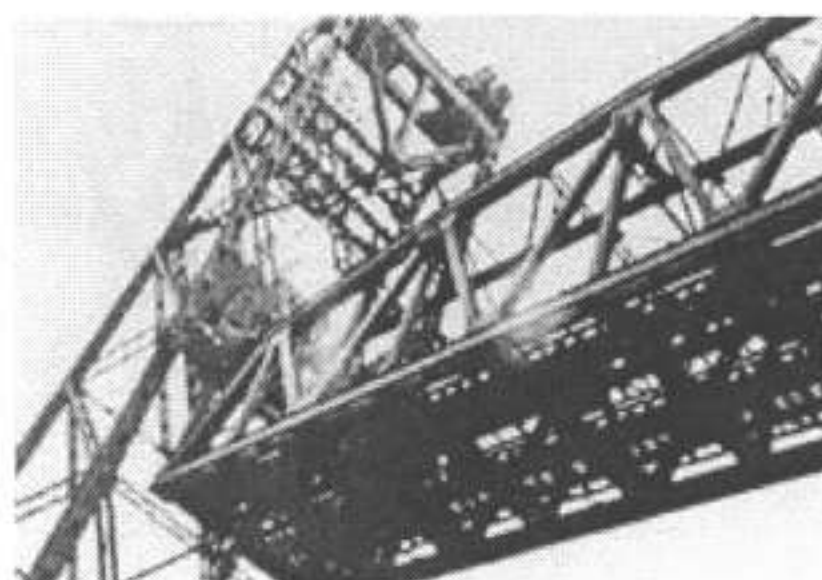
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The Bridge

De Brug



1928 / The Netherlands / silent / B&W / 11 min / 35mm

Director, Script, Camera, Editor, Producer: Joris Ivens
Production company: CAPI Amsterdam

A vertical lift-bridge is the object of study in *The Bridge*. Ivens managed to produce a tremendously dynamic film based on what otherwise might appear to be a static object. "For me, *The Bridge* consisted of a laboratory of movements, tints, forms, contrasts, rhythms and the relationship between all these phenomena." The film was immediately recognized as a masterpiece by international critics and fellow filmmakers, and Ivens was instantly catapulted to fame as an avant-garde filmmaker.

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Rain Regen



1929 / The Netherlands / silent / B&W / 12 min / 35mm

Directors, Script, Producers: Joris Ivens, Mannus Franken

Script: Joris Ivens, Mannus Franken

Camera, Editor: Joris Ivens

Music: 1932: Lou Lichtveld, 1941: Hanns Eisler

Production company: CAPI Amsterdam

A day in the life of a rainshower. In this city symphony piece, Ivens captures Amsterdam's changing appearance throughout a rainshower. With poetry and a range of moods, sunny Amsterdam streets give way first to a few rain drops in the canals and then to pouring rain on windows, umbrellas, trams, and streets, until finally the weather clears and the sun breaks through once again. Although the action seems to take place all on one day, it took Ivens several months to shoot the film, for even in Amsterdam it doesn't rain every day. With *The Bridge* (1928), *Rain* established his reputation as an avant-garde film artist. In 1932 Ivens asked Lou Lichtveld, who also wrote the music for *Philips Radio* (1931), to help create a sound track for the film. In 1941 *Rain* inspired Hanns Eisler to compose his "Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain," an endeavor Eisler termed a "Film Music Project."

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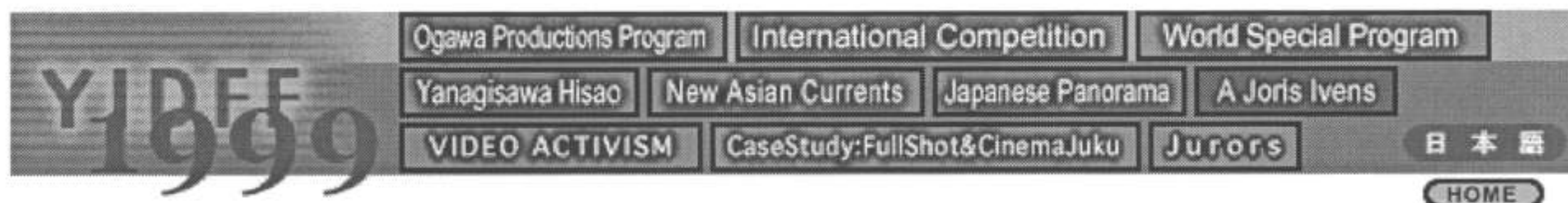
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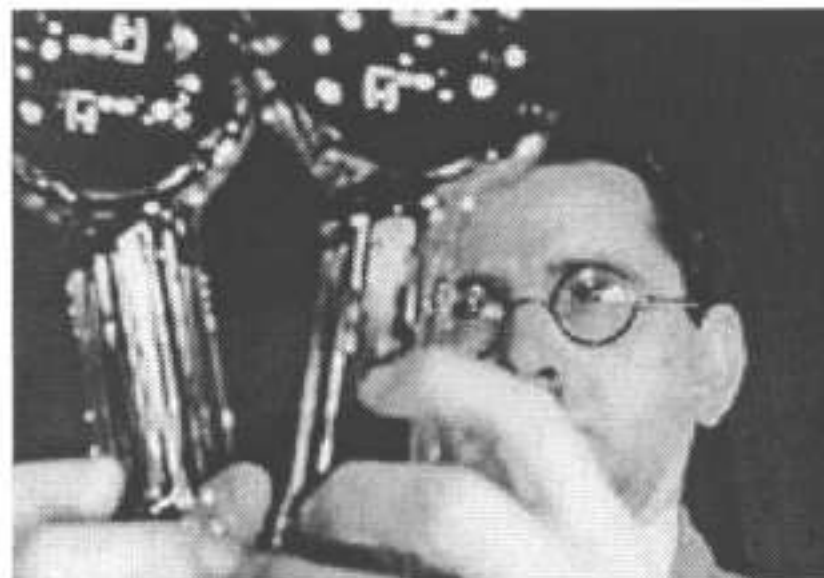


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Philips Radio



1931 / The Netherlands / sound / B&W / 36 min / 35mm

Director, Script: Joris Ivens
Camera: Joris Ivens, Jean Dréville, John Fernhout, Mark Kolthoff
Editors: Joris Ivens, Helen van Dongen
Music: Lou Lichtveld
Production company: CAPI Amsterdam
Commissioned by: Philips Eindhoven N.V.

The first Dutch sound film and another avant-garde masterpiece. *Philips Radio* is an ode to technological progress as well as a critique of monotonous labor. Ever-repeating actions at stamping machines and on an assembly-line, and continuous light bulb-blowing illustrate the dullness of the physically demanding work. Although it was a company-sponsored film, several Philips branches refused to show the film because of its social content.

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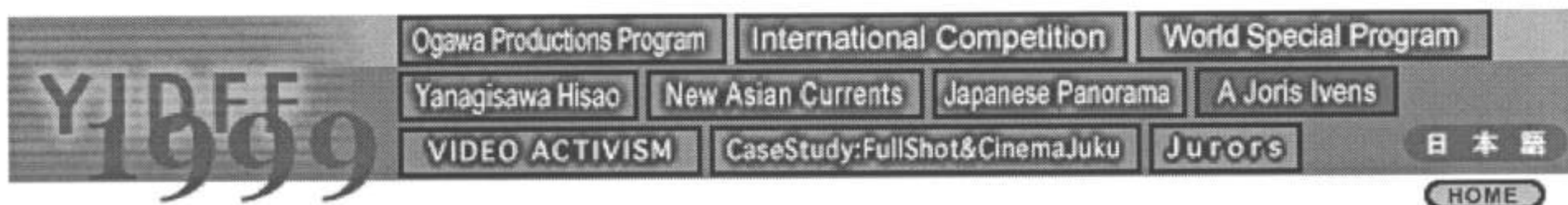
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New Earth Nieuwe Gronden



1933 / The Netherlands / B&W / 30 min / 35mm

Director, Script: Joris Ivens
Camera: Joris Ivens, Joop Huisken, Helen van Dongen, John Fernhout, Eli Lotar
Editors: Joris Ivens, Helen van Dongen
Music: Hanns Eisler; ballad by Julian Arendt and Ernst Busch, sung by Ernst Busch
Commentary: Joris Ivens
Production company: CAPI Amsterdam

In 1930, the Zuiderzee Works episode in *We Are Building* had been expanded into the much longer film *Zuiderzee*. In 1934 Ivens used the same material, along with additional footage, to make another version: *New Earth*. This time, sustained by stirring music composed by Hanns Eisler and stronger, more compact editing, the film included an unmistakable political message. After the segment on land reclamation and the closing of the dyke, the film continues with images of economic crisis and poverty among laborers. Ivens opposes this to market speculation: while grain was dumped into the ocean to keep prices elevated, those workers who had helped reclaim land for agriculture were subsequently shown to be unemployed and starving. The closing of the dyke remains one of the strongest editing sequences in all of Ivens's work.

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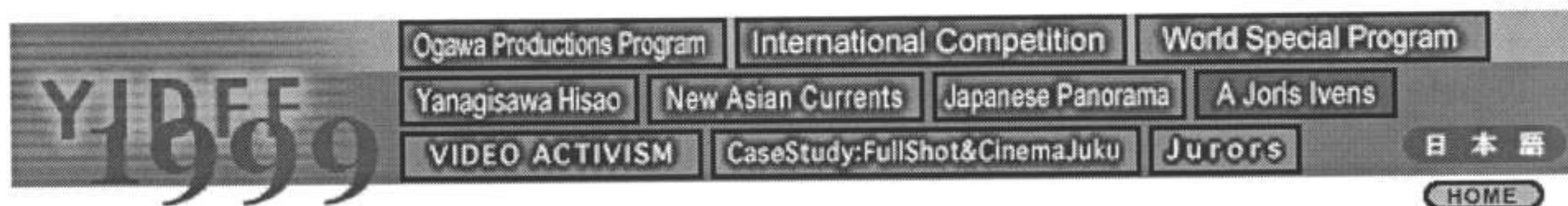
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Borinage

Misère au Borinage



1934 / Belgium / silent / B&W / 34 min / 35mm

Directors, Script, Editors: Joris Ivens, Henri Storck

Camera: Joris Ivens, Henri Storck, François Rents

Production company: Club de l'Éran, EPI

In 1933 Henri Storck, one of the leading figures in the Belgian film avant-garde, asked Ivens to help make a film about the social consequences of the previous year's miners' strike in Borinage. Arriving at the mine region Storck and Ivens were so taken by the situation they encountered that they forgot all about aesthetics. As Henri Storck tells it, "We stopped thinking about cinema and how to frame shots and instead became obsessed by the irrepressible need to produce images as stark, bare, and sincere as possible to fit the cruel facts reality had thrown at us." The film confronts the spectator with sobering images of misery: miners unemployed or exploited by the mine companies, with entire families evicted from their homes because they couldn't afford the rent. Ivens used dramatic re-enactment to incorporate the events of the mine strike of 1932 into the film.

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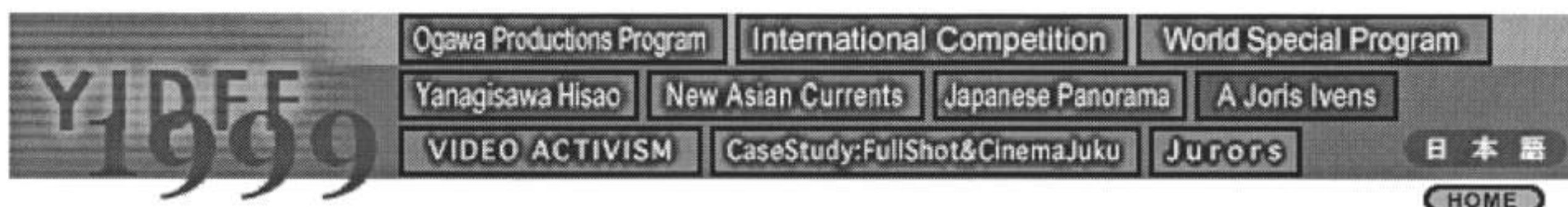
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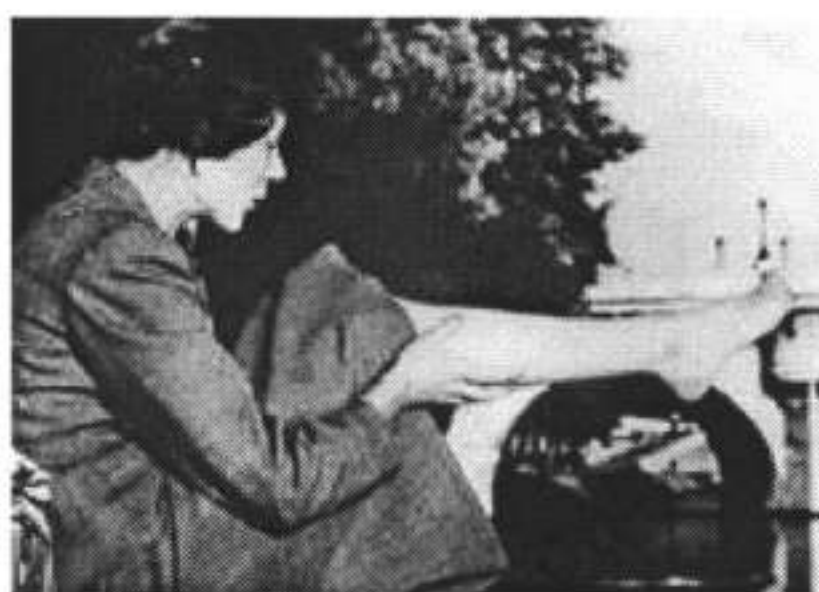
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The Seine Meets Paris

La Seine a rencontre Paris



1957 / France / sound / B&W / 32 min / 35mm

Director: Joris Ivens

Script: Joris Ivens, from an idea by Georges Sadoul

Camera: André Demaître, Philippe Brun

Editor: Gisele Chézeau

Music: Philippe Gérard

Commentary: written by Jacques Prévert, spoken by Serge Reggiani

Producer: Roger Pigaut

Production company: Garance Film, Paris

The first film Ivens made upon his return from Eastern Europe is a filmed poem about Paris and Parisian life on the banks of the Seine. The film follows the flow of the river through the city of Paris, making a portrait of this city and its people as they live, stroll, sunbathe, fish, work, swim, love, and laugh beside the Seine. The poem, written by Jacques Prévert, gives the film an extra dimension, and the music, with its recurring theme of a child's song, gives it a melancholic touch.

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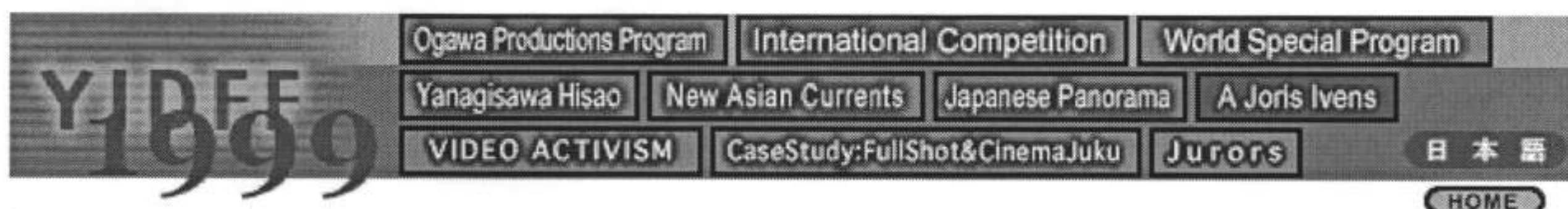
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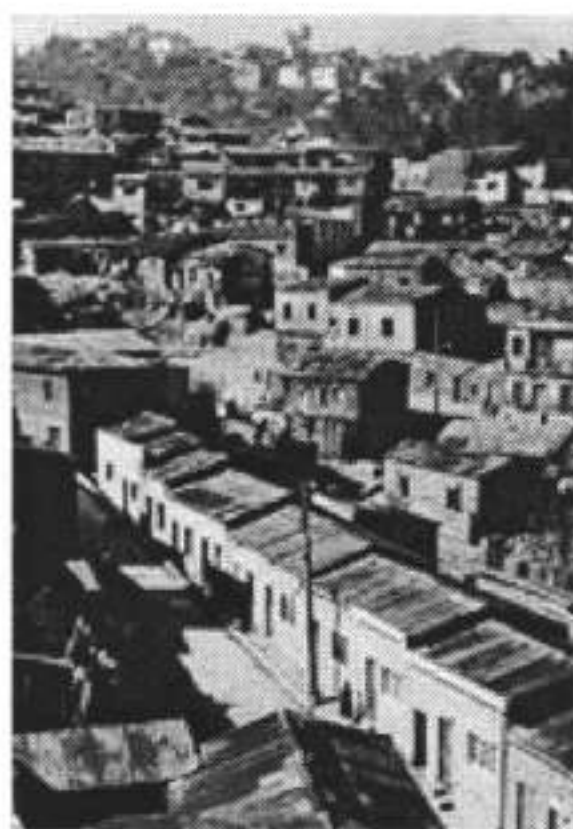


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... A Valparaiso



1963 / France, Chile / B&W and color / 37 min / 35mm

Director, Script: Joris Ivens
Camera: Georges Strouv, Patricio Guzman, Leonarde Martinez
Editor: Jean Ravel
Music: Gustavo Becerra, ' Nous irons a Valparaiso' sung by Germaine Montero
Commentary: Roger Pigaut (written by Chris Marker)
Producer: Luis Carnegio Production company: Argos Films, Cine Experimental de la Universidad de Chile

In 1962 Ivens was invited to Chile to teach and make films. Together with students he made . . . *A Valparaiso*, one of his most moving films. The work contrasts the distinguished history of the seaport with its present state of affairs. We see a city, built on forty-two hills, its wealth and poverty, its daily life on the streets, its sets of stairs, its rack railways, and its bars. Although the port has declined in importance, the rich past is still present in the impoverished city. The film echoes this irony in its dialectical poetic style, interweaving the daily reality (of 1963) with the proud history of the city. Switching partway from black and white to color, the film finally leaves us with a hopeful perspective - that of the children who are playing on the stairs and hills of this beautiful town.

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The Mistral
 Pour le Mistral


1965 / France / B&W and color / 30 min / 35mm

Director: Joris Ivens

Script: Joris Ivens, René Guyonnet, Armand Gatti

Camera: André Dumaître, Pierre Lhomme, Gilbert Duhalde

Editor: Jean Ravel, Emanuelle Castro

Music: Luc Ferrari

Commentary: André Verdet, spoken by Roger Pigaut

Producer: Claude Nedjar

Production company: Centre Européen Radio-Cinéma-Télévision

One of Ivens's most poetic works - it is his first attempt to film the wind. With beautiful photography, powerful editing, and a poetic commentary, the film tries to make the wind visible and tangible. It starts in black and white, switches to color partway, and ends in Cinemascope to illustrate the force of the coming mistral wind that blows in the south of France. It was difficult to find a producer for this film, for most people were rather reluctant to finance a film with an invisible main character. Finally Claude Nedjar agreed to produce the film, which despite many financial problems was finished in 1965.

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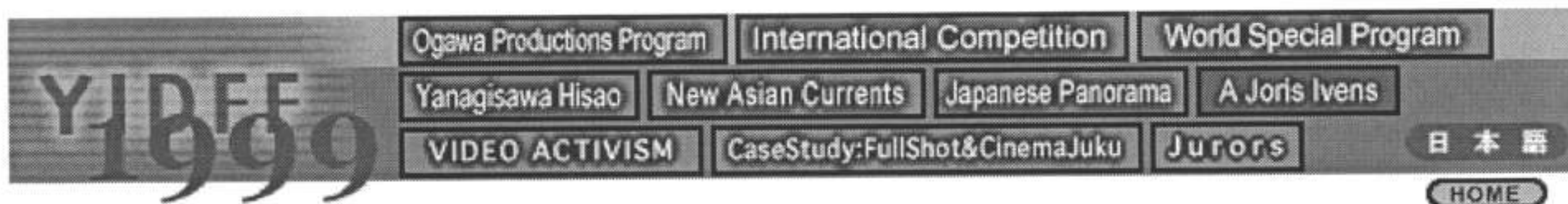
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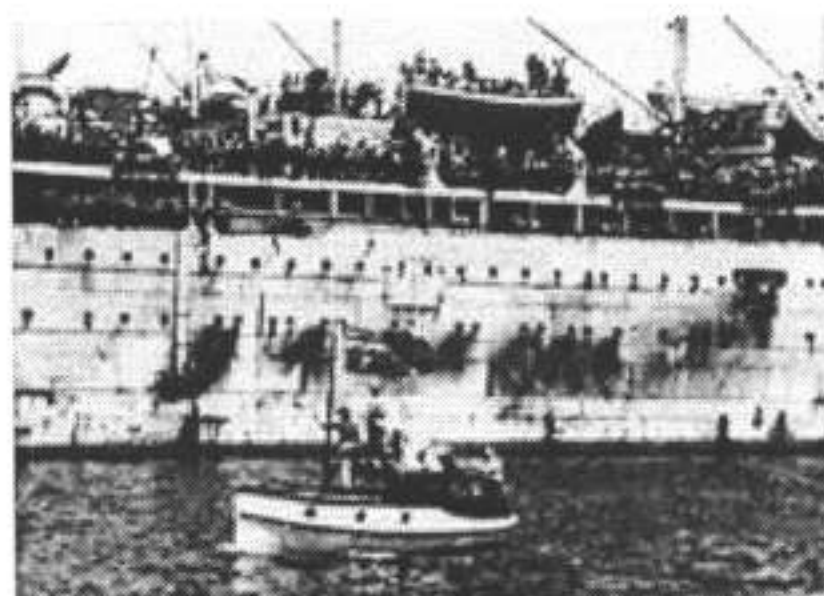


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Indonesia Calling



1946 / Australia / B&W / 22 min / 35mm

Director, Script, Editor: Joris Ivens

Camera: Marion Michelle

Commentary: written by Catherine Duncan, spoken by Peter Finch

Production company: Waterfront Union of Australia

Appointed by the Dutch government as Film Commissioner for the Dutch East Indies, Ivens was supposed to film the liberation of Indonesia, and then make educational and informational films there. However, when it became clear that the Dutch government would renege on its promise to make Indonesia independent, Ivens resigned his post, stating that the Dutch were not working for Indonesia's independence, but for its re-colonization. After his resignation he began working on *Indonesia Calling*, a film shot partially in secret which unabashedly demanded independence for Indonesia. The film's power is in its content rather than in its aesthetic achievement.

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