

DOCUMENTARY BOX #17



Interview with

Helen van Dongen

Interviewer: Abé Mark Nornes



Townsend, Vermont

I met Helen van Dongen (Durant) in Townsend, Vermont, at the peak of the autumn leaves last year. Townsend is a prototypical New England mountain town, complete with a small downtown and a white, steepled church. This was not the setting I had imagined for an encounter with a woman whose career was intertwined with many of the most famous documentaries in film history. However, after a long career as an editor and director she retired to the Townsend area with her husband, a well respected White House reporter. Together they wrote and edited impressive books on Appalachian life.

As she explains below, Van Dongen entered the film world by happy coincidence. Her employer's son was Joris Ivens and she ended up present at the creation of two of the first great films of the avant-garde, *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929). She developed an international network of filmmaker colleagues through the activities of the Film Liga in Amsterdam, which hosted people like Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Ruttmann and other luminaries of the silent cinema. At the coming of sound, she studied at the studios in Joinville. She taught editing in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. She worked with Buñuel on projects sending films to Latin America, and on a Capra project *Know Your Enemy: Japan* (1944). However, it was her skillful editing that made her name, building a filmography stocked with canonical works from the history of documentary film, films like *Borinage* (1934), *The 400 Million* (1939), *The Spanish Earth* (1937), and *Louisiana Story* (1948).

With the exception of compilation filmmakers like Esther Shub and certain experimental films, the editors of documen-

tary films rarely receive attention. Perhaps it is because of the documentarist's emphasis on representing reality—thinking about editing requires us to consider the thorough mediation of the filmmaker's craft. When documentary editors do attract comment, one occasionally hears the half-joke that behind every great (male) documentary filmmaker stands a female editor. While this may foreground the sexual politics of the production side of documentary, it still threatens to slight the considerable achievement of a filmmaker like Helen van Dongen. Her artistry in constructing powerful wholes out of so much disparate footage earned her worldwide recognition as a master editor. She shared her thoughts on her films and her life as an editor of nonfiction film with *Documentary Box*.

—Abé Mark Nornes

Abé Mark Nornes (AMN): You started at CAPI knowing nothing, but discovered film there, right?

Helen van Dongen (HVD): The Amsterdam firm called CAPI sold optical equipment and employed me as a four-language correspondent. At the same time, the owner's son, Joris Ivens, returned from his technical studies in Germany and became the adjunct director of the Amsterdam office. Joris had a desk at one end of the hallway—I was at the other end. Outside of the building of CAPI Joris kept a loft where he kept all his gear and photographic equipment. He was one of the first film fanatics around.

I was always willing to chip in and help. Because by helping, I could get out of the office. Ivens Sr. would come by



Rain

and ask me why I was away from the desk, I would remind him that he's the one that wanted me to take care of his son!

I had very little to do with *The Bridge*, basically just made sure his camera was loaded. But by the second year in the production of *Rain*, I already knew how to handle a film camera. So one day when he had to go somewhere but it was forecasted to rain hard, he said, "Why don't you take the camera and see if you can get some shots in this pouring rain." I did, but I was scared out of my wits. We had to buy that film and it was in 25 meter roles, a fortune, so shots in *Rain* were no longer than this. But I got some good shots in.

After one year or so, I took the liberty to start thinking for myself on that side, and only because he was always away. If he's not doing it, maybe I can. Joris never said, "No." Well, I have to admit I rarely asked, because I wanted more! I found it all so fascinating.

AMN: How did you get into the editing side of things?

HVD: I asked, "Well, now what?" And he said we'll now simply put it in order, a simple order. And in a primitive way, the editing began for me right there. Simply to put things in order. How does this begin? What do you see then? What do you see then? I would think this, but I wouldn't dare cut one frame of the film, because it was gold. Every piece was gold. And so on.

AMN: I understand these first films were edited—ordered—on Ivens's window. . .

HVD: In order to view film, you had a glass and a winder here and a winder there. Gradually, there was a little viewing machine. But in order to edit a film like *The Bridge*, the shots were not much longer than this. The editing of both *The Bridge* and *Rain* were rather simple. They were one-reelers, and practically all the shots were used. The shots were hung from a wooden pole set against the window. Joris would shift them back and forth until he was content with the order. Only then were they spliced together. That way,

not a single take was lost. Not a bad idea.

AMN: You mentioned you were more involved in *Rain*. Did you help in the actual cutting of film?

HVD: In spite of the fact that I had not really "organized a whole film," this time I had to act. Joris had gone to Russia to learn more from Eisenstein and Pudovkin and those folks. All we did was cut from one thing to another. Anybody else would have edited it completely differently. It had all kinds of short scenes, so you used as much as possible. Simply use what goes from here to there without a shock. I did a great deal of that. You know, Joris didn't have patience. He wanted to go out with his camera.

AMN: So because film was gold you just wanted to use it all?

HVD: Well, sometimes that's all there was. And sometimes he couldn't buy anymore and we couldn't steal anymore. I mean, we both "borrowed" from the firm!

AMN: That pretty much sums up the history of independent documentary!

HVD: I guess it's very common. It was only Flaherty who had so much to play with.

AMN: I'd like to press you on the editing of *Rain*. Are you saying you resisted cutting it into smaller segments and simply arranged what you had in an appropriate order?

HVD: Well, we never cut it in smaller pieces, however, we did a great deal of rearranging. And automatically you know what you have, and I find that you often know what needs to follow, but it isn't there. But you know it's there somewhere in the scenes you shot earlier. So you find it and see what you can do with it.

AMN: Do you think this method may also have something to do with the subject matter? *Rain* has this smooth feel.

HVD: Well, naturally it was smooth. *Rain* took a long time to edit, and even by the time the music came along we threw around an awful lot of stuff.

AMN: What was the music for *Rain*?



Editing *Louisiana Story* ©MoMA

■ Helen van Dongen Selected Filmography

- 1928 *The Bridge* ("De Brug", Dir. Joris Ivens):
General assistant
- 1929 *Rain* ("Regen", Dir. Joris Ivens):
General assistant, assistant camera
- 1930 *We Are Building* ("Wy Bouwen", Dir. Joris Ivens):
Assistant director
- 1930 *Zuiderzee* (Dir. Joris Ivens, Produced by the
Government of The Netherlands):
Camera, editor
- 1931 *Philips Radio* (Dir. Joris Ivens): Co-editor
- 1934 *Borinage* (Dir. Joris Ivens and Henry Storck): Editor
Daily Life (Dir. Hans Richter): Editor
- 1936 *Spain in Flames*: Editor, Producer
- 1937 *The Spanish Earth* (Dir. Joris Ivens): Editor
- 1939 *The 400 Million* (Dir. Joris Ivens): Editor
- 1941 *Power and the Land* (Dir. Joris Ivens): Editor
- 1943 *Peoples of Indonesia*: Editor, director
- 1944 *Know Your Enemy: Japan*: Co-editor
- 1948 *Louisiana Story* (Dir. Robert Flaherty): Editor
- 1950 *Of Human Rights*: Director, producer, editor

HVD: It was Lou Lichtveld, a modern composer at the time. And then there was that new thing, the use of subjective sound and music. His brother, Dr. Willem Ivens, a highly respected medical doctor, was interested in all those scientific things. He came and saw what I was up to. (His brother was the main protector of Joris because if Joris was aspiring to something artful he should be able to do it, even if the brother didn't condone all the things Joris did in normal life—but he kicked him around once in a while.) And what was I up to? I didn't know a thing. It was all intuition. One problem after another I had to solve, because there was no machinery for it. And it was so fascinating! And I didn't know that I couldn't do it. If someone had asked me if I could make a film, I would say, "I have never even seen a film!" But through this introduction to it, I began to imagine all the minor stuff that you could do with it, and what it meant. It was one of the greatest pieces of education I've ever had.

AMN: You must have learned a lot at Filmliga, too.

HVD: Yes, but it was that problem solving that made me, for editing especially, because I had to start from scratch. There were nothing but these miserable Hollywood films. That was a totally different kind of editing, because those things are completely dominated by how far they have to walk, this way or that way or what they are talking about.

AMN: It's decided by the narrative.

HVD: It's totally different from documentary, where you've got all this material that's basically unrelated at the time of shooting. Or when I get a man like Flaherty who overshoots enormously, where his shooting is really very good, you know, when there's very little you can really watch and say, "yuck!"

But on the other hand, because when you are handed 325,000 feet of film then it's another problem. I mastered that, too. I have my ways of doing that. I look and look and

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look and look, and there are certain things that are out. You have to look over things over and over again, and ask what does it tell you? And so when I choose something, it's because it told me something. And then ask, can I use it somewhere? At least I have to keep it in my mind constantly because if I get more material, I have to consider if I can use it in this new context. I have a memory for those things.

AMN: I'd like to ask you about Filmliga. Where you in on the creation of it?

HVD: Yes. But because that came gradually because there wasn't a room in CAPI. I had to be at all the screenings, because I had to run the projectors. I had to figure out the speed, doing it by hand, you know.

AMN: And you also acted as translator.

HVD: Yes, of course, that was when people came to talk, and they'd have their great shouting matches. Loud, filthy content. If everybody spoke so fast, it was hardly a literal translation. That was fun, and there again I learned so much. No film school could have taught me so much.

AMN: Yes, as a teacher, I'm very jealous.

HVD: Oh really? But there it was. The fact was, Joris was an uncontrolled and uncontrollable person. Everyone shouted at everyone. Always very excited. Everyone's very exciting. It was wild! Exciting! If you get an Eisenstein and a Vertov and a Joris or some other person in Holland, anyone that thought they knew about film, they'd have a shouting party. With friends from Germany, Joris could communicate very well. But when it came to Russian I got stuck with it, because most of the Russians could speak French. Since it was their second language, thank goodness they spoke a little slower.

AMN: To return to editing, even when someone is self-taught they have to study. How did you start studying your craft?

HVD: Joris did the shooting, at which I was not always present. But when the time that Joris disappeared for some-

thing, as was usual, well, I must say I took on responsibilities without being asked very often. Because he was away, what could I do? I wasn't going to sit there. From the beginning, I wasn't the kind of person to do nothing. After all, I wasn't going to wait if it was my job to help him. (Not that his father was very happy with it, but that was another matter.) I wasn't about to discuss what I could and couldn't do if he, every time, was happy enough that it was done and that I could do it. It meant that he could go away a little longer and shoot here and there, and it kept him out of my ears.

Anyway, I studied movement, the way things move in the frame. I only saw things in still images, because we didn't have a moviola, only a light table between two winders. But to get a sense about walking, and where do you walk, and where do you make the cut? How does the movement work? To get a sense for this, I bought a mirror on the Jewish market and was always busy picking things up, or moving in front of this mirror. Where is the best place to cut from a long shot of a walking person to part of the same person walking nearby? I was walking and turning in front of the mirror.

AMN: To practice editing!

HVD: To practice editing and know where to cut. I also had to be very careful, because we didn't have the money to print new shots. I would make certain motions in front of the mirror, for instance, pointing, walking, running, climbing and that sort of thing. Then I'd think about where the best place to cut on movement was.

That's how I got the name of the dancing editor. Joris's friends would come in, see me and say, "Oh, there's the dancer editor again." They'd make fun of me, and I'd say, "OK, you boys. Just wait until you try it yourself." (I was a very good dancer probably because of the same thing.)

Another reason I got this name was because—since all we had was a light table—I would hold the strip of film with



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one hand, and pull it through the fingers of my other hand to see how the image moved and changed. [She imitates the gesture, which sends one hand in a graceful arc into the air.—AMN] I would really do this, shifting my finger to adjust for things and see what they did. For human bodies, how does one walk? Like this, and this. Piece by piece by piece. So this is how I started. But it changed later on with the moviola, where I could see everything and how it moved. And go back and forth and back and forth. It made it much easier.

AMN: Just after *Philips Radio* (1931), you participated on *Borinage*. I find it very curious, because the editing styles are so different. The former is close to Soviet montage, while the latter is so straightforward.

HVD: It was so straightforward because that's all there was.

AMN: What do you mean?

HVD: I mean there were so little outs. We used everything they shot. *Borinage* was under police protection, and we didn't have outs. We kept it simple because it was just what happened. For example, that little march had so few shots because people with clubs were standing only a couple feet away.

AMN: Did this change also have something to do with the fact that it was so political? This straightforward approach?

HVD: Well, it was straightforward because of the lack of money. It was straightforward from the editor's point of

view because there wasn't anything more. And if that's the case, there wasn't anything else to make it beautiful. I'd say 95% of the shots were used in their entirety and put together in a style that was the least shocking. Or to put it more positively, what we had was used in the best possible visual manner. You do it in the least shocking way that's pictorial.

AMN: It's really the opposite of *Philips Radio* where there are lots of shots in a complex montage.

HVD: A lot of things you can make.

AMN: The boxes tumbling up and down at the end—you don't have a story, so it frees the visual aspects of editing.

HVD: But *Borinage* was a kind of political film. I was never very happy with political films.

AMN: Well, Iven's career really turns at that point.

HVD: That's right, and so does Eisler's. So Eisler in particular said he wanted agitation. And Joris said, "Well, agitation. Why not?" And it brought him another film. I mean that's a little bit of a . . . but it was true. Whatever came, he would do it. And in this particular period the agitation, political things were about the only way an independent artist could use the medium of film. Because no one would give him a lot of money to make a picture, so he did these political films where the money would come in ten dollars at a time—and from what you could grab from your father's shop.

AMN: But it's curious that with this turn to the political,

Ivens's filmmaking itself became less experimental.

HVD: I don't know, because I'm not a political person. Joris was the man who shot, and who talked blah blah blah with all his comrades, and I was the woman who put it all together. And I did not do it for his pleasure or anyone else's but my own. Because it was fascinating, and I had a chance right there, and I didn't mind doing it. And I learned a lot and I figured out a lot, and I have a lot of imagination myself.

AMN: In *Borinage* there are these shifts between fictional and documentary scenes. Was it different cutting those two kinds of sequences?

HVD: No. I wouldn't think so. For me it's all beauty. As beautiful as possible. And that goes with my feeling for what is beautiful.

AMN: Actually, one of the shocks that that film holds is the contrast between the astounding poverty and the beauty of its rendering. Those huge heaps of coal, etc.

HVD: So once in a while you get someone who comes along and says, "How can you make something so horrible so beautiful?" And I say, "I don't know, but there is beauty in horror." I didn't do it because it was beautiful. I do not get any satisfaction out of things that are horrible. Maybe sometimes it's necessary to show such things, but very seldom. I'm a person that remains a person, and the conditions that are inhuman are far more valuable than any corpse or any destruction. Because then you get to the point when decent human beings are the ones suffering, not beaten-up corpses.

AMN: In WWII you worked in the Capra unit on *Know Your Enemy: Japan* before it was discontinued. The Capra unit had access to many of these kinds of images. Was there a sense of a line people shouldn't cross? Images that were so violent they should not be shown to the public in films? We were talking about how some horrible images are beautiful, and about how there's an ethics about using some of these images. But during a war some of these ethical questions

were downplayed and the level of violence skyrocketed. So I'm wondering if there were certain kinds of images that you just would not use.

HVD: It would depend on the individual filmmaker. When the footage came in there it was in the billions of feet—more than with Flaherty even—and there was such an incredible amount of violence. (And they didn't spare me because I was a woman. They'd just as soon say, "Oh it's a woman, get her out," just to find someone who was a little lazier.) Anyway, I wasn't picking images just because they were violent. Or because there was a broken up person or whatever. That was totally unnecessary, because I have given more attention to the person who did it than to what he did. Narration can substitute for the image, because how many broken people can you see? One may shock you, but after that it doesn't mean anything anymore.

AMN: In *Know Your Enemy: Japan*, it's well-known that the production fell apart and Ivens left. But what exactly happened on that film?

HVD: It didn't get anywhere. This is where we went and were supposed to work on this thing. It was toward the end of the war, and Joris was there along with Herb Foreman, Frank Capra, John Huston... The government could not make up its mind about what to do with Japan. These are the politicians. In the meantime, we sat down and watched footage. Oh my goodness, there were millions of things from Japan. And the Japanese themselves had filmed practically everything. I was looking at film endlessly, but actually doing very little. And Joris, as usual, went all over the place trying get his next thing in place and so on and so forth. Capra was there. But I was the only one who was getting films ready for projection, and just sit through it and sit through it. And I had a crew of five or six soldiers who still were left over from another film, and it really didn't get anywhere besides endless screenings. It was finally shelved and used for stock

shots on other productions.

AMN: What was your impression of the films from Japan? Did they include both fiction and documentary?

HVD: Anything! So you get to see too much. And Capra, we never saw. He was too busy and the war was basically over. And Joris was trying to find another job. And he was going to make a thing with Greta Garbo. So everybody was gone but me. And I didn't really want to be there, but Philip Dunne was a Hollywood producer and we had a nice relationship, and he said, "How would you like to make a film after the war?" I said, "Sure," and got out of there. That's how I got to direct my first film, *New Review* #2 (1945), which has nothing to do with Joris.

AMN: It must have been satisfying to reach that point.

HVD: It was very satisfying. And not only that, I had a crew of five soldiers, all of whom thought they were Hollywood big shots. They didn't get paid very well as soldiers, but even worse would they have a boss that was a woman? In Hollywood? No way. So after about two weeks with them, I said, "Look here boys, I have to make a film. And you are going to do a lot of work. And if you want to go after six at night and watch miserable, flossy films you can do what you will. But next morning, by eight o'clock you're going to work here." They responded, "If you don't like it, why not just go to the general?" And I said, "If you don't like it, you go to the general. So let's start." It took another three weeks, and I had them all with me. From eight in the morning to five at night, doing what I needed and more. Whatever it took to make a good film. And they did, because then they got interested in the whole thing. And they started thinking that they weren't working with a woman, but with someone who wanted to make a good film. And we did, and remained good friends long after that.

And because this was in the Hollywood circle, well the films were... and so on, of course. You know, once in a while

I would say, "Well, how was your night?" Oh! Because they took over the facility, and they had a hold of the filthiest films anyone could possibly find and they would screen them at night. And that was supposedly the screen for me. But I said, "I have nothing to do with what you have to do after five. It's none of my business."

AMN: You know, I've done quite a bit of research in the National Archives, and read the memos and reports people were writing. I'm left with the impression that, despite the fact that there was a world war on, the filmmakers were having a lot of fun! Did you have a fun time during WWII?

HVD: That depends on what you call fun.

AMN: I see. Well, let's go back to the 1930s for a moment. After *Borinage* you spent some time with Marcel L'Herbier at Joinville and Hans Richter in Paris. But then around 1934-36, you were in the Soviet Union. You went there to teach and study. This was a traumatic time for filmmakers in the Soviet Union, what with the legislation of Socialist Realism and the attack on montage. What was it like for you as an editor?

HVD: That was when Joris went there to make a film with Gustav von Wangenheim [*Borzy* (1936), a film about the Reichstag fire—AMN], a German and not a very pleasant person. Joris was there for three months, and then wrote to tell me I might as well come over there because there was a new film school and I could teach editing there and teach them sound because it had just arrived there. Joris and Wangenheim got involved in their film, but both wanted to be big shots, so Joris left and returned to America. And I stayed there because I could do an awful lot. I taught filmmaking and editing. I also made the Russian version of *Borinage*. And *Spain in Flames* (1936). It was quite a lively time, and I didn't have enough time to get involved in politics. I've never been a much of a politician, so I stuck to the film.

AMN: After this, until 1939, you went and worked with Progressive Education Commission of the Rockefeller Foundation and you were reediting fiction films?

HVD: Well, it was very interesting, but interesting for me for only a year or so. What they wanted was to use film for education in colleges, and for abstract ideas more than teaching mechanics. They had teamed up with Sarah Lawrence College in New York, a rich girls' college, and wanted to try using films to inspire discussions on social affairs, whether it was working or learning or cooking or family affairs. I had to look through a great deal of Hollywood films to see whether we could use parts of them.

AMN: So you converted Hollywood films into documentaries?

HVD: Well, in a sense, yes, but then it was still a play film. Of course, you put it upside down and it becomes something else. Because what you did was present them with a problem, and provide the foundation for a discussion. And on the university level. So it was interesting up to a point, but after a year it became the same old thing. But I got paid well! And not only that, I got my Green Card!

AMN: During the war, you worked on the Nelson Rockefeller/MoMA project on Latin American film.

HVD: Yes, with Luis Buñuel and Iris Barry. It was to teach the South Americans economic things, and that too was made with the help of Hollywood films. I did that for about a year, and then came the break with Buñuel that broke us up. Buñuel had been a friend, but unfortunately, he started to get notions that he was... you know my section was in 35mm film, and then the Film Department of MoMA also had a 16mm group that had nothing to do with me, but we worked in the same building. And of course, there was a kind of jealousy over the difference between the 16mm and 35mm groups. We were completely separate. I was in charge of mine. So I ran it. But there was a jealousy between 35mm

and 16mm. I don't know who did what, but one day Buñuel came flying in and said, "What the hell, this that and the other thing, what did you do with this, where were you all?" Somebody had said that my group was just taking it easy and going shopping or something. I said, "What are you talking about?" And he said, "From now on you'll start punching the time clock." I said, "Fine, go right ahead, but I won't be here."

AMN: He was very controlling.

HVD: Yes, and I told Iris Barry, "Look, this is not for me. I'm not going to fight with Luis exploding over something that has nothing to do with me." No one was outside of the building when they shouldn't be. If they were out, they were going to the lab or a screening. Unfortunately, Luis got furious and our friendship was over.

AMN: I want to ask you about *The Spanish Earth*, which has two versions. One has Hemingway on the soundtrack and the other Orson Welles. How did two versions come about?

HVD: Well, the text is basically the same, but when the film was ready to put the narration on, we were under time pressure. Orson was the big Voice of Time, and he had that voice, he spoke that way. So he read it, but I said to Joris, "Let's make a recording, not with the film." And I said, "It's terrible. It just sounds like *The March of Time* (1935-1951). The whole film is ruined. You can't do that!" But Joris said, "Ah, but he's famous and an attraction," but I asked him, "Are you selling out?" He didn't say any more. But Hemingway and I were good friends so I asked him if he'd mind reading it, because he was in Spain with Joris, and Joris had already mentioned the possibility to him. So I asked him the same thing I told Flaherty: "Why don't you just try reading it?" And so one day when Hemingway resisted again, I said, "Look, will you just read it for me. I'm not showing you the film. Just read it slowly, as if you were talking to a big group of people." And he did. Afterwards, I

told Joris that he better listen to it, but he equivocated. Money money money! So we eventually did both, but I don't want to hear it with Orson Welles. It's not my film.

AMN: So you did the same thing with Flaherty later, having him read it out almost against his will.

HVD: But you know, I put my foot down as much as I could. They differed so enormously, you know, because Welles would dramatically intone, [she does an exaggerated Welles imitation—AMN] "The Spanish earth is soft and hard..." you know, but Hemingway would do it quietly, very quiet. Because who is going to yell against the image of some Spanish man walking down the road with his donkey?

AMN: Yes, the contrast between the soundtrack and the image track is one of the things that makes that film so powerful.

HVD: But I don't know if you saw a lot of *The March of Time*, but it just blares all the time. And the stuff that came in there, if you took the sound away, all you've got is a lot of little pictures that have absolutely no content.

AMN: I have a question for Japanese audiences, who are very curious about Paul Rotha. His book on documentary made a huge impact on Japanese documentary when it was translated by a famous woman filmmaker (Atsugi Taka) into Japanese in the late 1930s, and it's highly respected to this very day. I was wondering what that book meant to you.

HVD: I was not aware of its existence.

AMN: That doesn't surprise me that much. If you read the standard histories of documentary they really don't talk about that book much.

HVD: I don't know. I didn't read... I know the one you're talking about. He was writing tons of stuff, and Jay Leyda was writing about the same subjects. And there was a third one, and they all came in a clash. Each one of them wanted to direct me in their way, but I said maybe it was a good introduction but no thanks. I have no theory. I have the

film. I look at the film over and over and over again, and from there ideas and possibilities emerge. It becomes a part of feeling, inside of me, and so if there's any kind of difference, and like a love affair you notice one little thing that shouldn't be there. And so you start arguing with yourself. Should I take it out or leave it in? And then when you have to courage to take it out, and see that it never belonged there in the first place and it doesn't fit in, but it takes so much determination.

AMN: So there were no books or writings that you found inspirational or exciting.

HVD: No, I don't even know if there were many at that time. The thing is that being constantly in contact with those who made films, I didn't have to read much about it. Because I was working on the same basis that we had to start from the roots. If someone comes along and says you have to do it this way, that's not right. Because every film is different, its content, rhythm, etc. etc. It's just like painting. You can't tell a painter what he can and can't do or it becomes stale.

AMN: After the war, you started directing your own films, began preparations and quit the nascent Indonesian Film Commission, but you also started working with Flaherty.

HVD: After a year of preparing the way for this commission, I knew it wasn't going to go anywhere, and I told the Netherlands, "Look here. This is office work and preparation. I've gone as far as I can." And Flaherty had already come to me and said he had been dreaming of the next film he wanted to make. He brought me these stories, and they were all... Flaherty stories.

Anyway, he said he wanted me to work with him and brought me down to Louisiana. He had some kind of cock-eyed thing and like usual it has a little boy. But as always, Flaherty started to film nature, so at the beginning there was an awful lot of the environment and the atmosphere. And then a boy and another boy and another boy. So there was a

I have no theory. I have the film. I look at the film over and over and over again, and from there ideas and possibilities emerge. It becomes a part of feeling, inside of me, and so if there's any kind of difference, and like a love affair you notice one little thing that shouldn't be there.

lot of shooting, and that came in handy later on.

So at first I had an awful lot of material to play with, but it didn't have any particular purpose. Later on they said I had a good memory, because towards the very end I pulled out surprise shots. The funny thing is that for the first time, Flaherty realized I was putting stuff in they'd forgotten about. Because he lived by what he saw, and so as he went on he'd forget. And then all of a sudden, he'd go "Hey where is that shot?"

"Do you want it back in there?"

"Well, why do you take it out?"

"Because if you have two reels of, swampland or whatever, you get bored with it!"

Don't say something like that to Flaherty! After that, he wouldn't talk to me for a couple days. So that was another thing I had to count on. Usually, we weren't fighting, but there were times when I was in the loophole and I'd tell him, "Look here. You don't want to talk to me. That's one thing. But if you keep brooding like this, I'm going home to New York." He was so moody!

AMN: Well, Flaherty's style, shooting so much footage over so much time, and massaging it into shape...

HVD: You know he was a man who could not write. Once he asked for my help in writing a piece for *Readers' Digest*—you see he needed money. So I said, "Well, come on over and I'll help you." It was about something like "The nicest woman I've ever known," that being the woman from his film *Man of Aran* (1934), and he was going to make a short story out of that. He came over and for about three or four weeks, it always started the same: he always came back and never with more than three sentences. I'd say, "Where's the rest? Why don't you write the rest and I'll go to bed. Write the story first and then we can work through it." So finally, I said, "Sorry Bob, how's that film we were going to make?"

AMN: Could you tell me a little about the creation of the

soundtrack for that film? Because there was some collaboration between you and Thompson, right?

HVD: Yeah, I didn't tell him.

AMN: Huh? Flaherty?

HVD: Right. At the beginning I told him, "You know, this is for a silent film. And can we talk about the music and sound part of it?"

"All you need is a little music."

"Well, we'll talk about that later on."

So he forgot it and we worked for a year and half. In the mean time, I was a little more, well, aggressive in the sense that I didn't ask Bob's advice because he kept on postponing making a decision. Because it only would have lengthened the thing. I wanted to have beautiful music, good music, not just records or a few players. And of course I had the composer in mind, Virgil Thompson. So I said to Virgil, "Look, give me an estimate of what you want because by now it's going to be your music, so tell me how many musicians you think you need."

"I want the whole orchestra."

"You're not going to get the Philadelphia Orchestra, but make something up for me, pleasee."

When we got the pure music we mixed it with other things I made up with sounds on the rig and the drilling, and put it in the film and brought it to Flaherty. He didn't think we were that far, yet. And then if he didn't like it then I'd have to convince him, because he couldn't have the whole orchestra back. You know. He had to be satisfied with it, and eventually he was.

It was like the other things. If he didn't see it twenty times first... And anything was always too loud. But you know you have to record in that way, anyone working with music knows that you start that way and later you can perhaps bring it down. But Flaherty didn't have the patience. And he didn't want you taking over. And there are certain times you



With Robert Flaherty ©MoMA

... When he wasn't shooting he just sat around all day running the small projection meeting. He could look at that film all day long. He would sit there and snort and sigh and talk to himself, "Oh, what can I do? What can I do?"



Filming *Louisiana Story*

have to take over, and eventually over the long run... After the first show, he said, "I couldn't have done it without you."

AMN: So Flaherty didn't have much interest in the soundtrack or sound editing?

HVD: Well, he knew it'd have to be there. But he was always "sh shh shh shh."

AMN: So what kind of collaboration did you have with the composer, Thompson?

HVD: Virgil was fascinated by the whole thing. He was a wonderful musician, but that doesn't make him a good filmmaker. I sometimes had to ask him if there was a little piece he could put in. And if it couldn't be done, I'd have to shift things around and show it to him later. I knew we were taking his music and we couldn't just take a piece out. But in order to make things a little longer, I'd have to play around with it. In the beginning, all these single scenes were not inevitably in that spot; some of them you could shift. But sometimes there was a specific note in his music that belonged to a specific part of the film, so you can't always change. Only a few pieces. To make something that was no longer than a couple feet might have taken two days. But we were both content in the end.

AMN: The music in *The 400 Million* is very interesting. It's 12-tone music by Hans Eisler.

HVD: That was recorded music.

AMN: So you didn't have the option of collaboration, as you did with Thompson.

HVD: Well, don't take my word for it, but I think it was just off of records, something off of other films. That was a time when we were doing one thing after another, so no time for anything.

AMN: That must have been restrictive as an editor, not being able to control the music.

HVD: That is probably because Hans Eisler, whether he

wrote it or simply chose it, just wanted it to say "music by Hans Eisler..." not "from a record." It was probably written for something else, because he sure did have a trunk-full, and he'd just take them off the bottom after about ten years [laughs]!

AMN: I guess you can do that, no matter what your field is, at a certain point in your career.

HVD: At the time, they were all immigrants. So they had one trunk, and we'd make a joke, just go siphon the bottom, and then you'd put it back. Not to make him think. But Hans was a very nice man, but he was also very lazy!

AMN: How was your collaboration with directors?

HVD: How many directors did I have?

AMN: Many!

HVD: None! I worked for Joris. And as long as he could shoot, he'd go away and leave me alone. So that was no problem with him. I also learned more the more he stayed away! Going around shooting was important to him, but that was about all he's sit still for.

Flaherty was also the man who did the shooting, and when he wasn't shooting he just sat around all day running the small projection meeting. He could look at that film all day long. He would sit there and snort and sigh and talk to himself, "Oh, what can I do? What can I do?" And Flaherty, you cannot discuss anything with him. He feels it, and you don't argue with him. So there were whole days in which we wouldn't talk to each other. And if he started to get smoozy... He was a child!

AMN: So you had a lot of creative space.

HVD: From the very beginning I had a lot of creative space and responsibility. I took on a lot of responsibility and some of the time I was scared to death because at the beginning I wasn't necessarily competent. But as I went along, I learned quickly what could be done. No one learns anything overnight.



I noticed you really have to take your own time to really look at the film, absorb what is in these things. If you see it often enough, like a painting, you find something new and beautiful, things that aren't necessarily sticking out at you. I also have to look at that damn film over and over and over and over again, and if there's something that's not quite right in there it tells you after a while. And the worse things get, you have to ask if the other things go together. Is something too bright or dark or distracting?

These are tiny little things, and no use telling Flaherty this because he ends up thinking you're changing his film from one thing to another. "Don't touch it!" And I must say I lied quite a number of times when he asked, "Did you change anything?" I'd tell him, "No. Did you think I changed something?" But if it was obvious, I'd apologize and still ask him to look at it first and I'd put it back the way it was if he didn't like it. Other times, I'd somehow forget to say something and I would leave it.

AMN: Now that's a special kind of collaboration!

HVD: It's one trick, you know? But I never pulled anything over on him, because he wouldn't have let me.

AMN: I wanted to ask you about how, in your early work you didn't have a moviola. You were doing it by feel, by looking at still images. How did your editing and art change once you were able to run it through a moviola.

HVD: I don't know if the editing changed, because we had nothing at the beginning. But when you could put it through a mechanism instead of your fingers, there really wasn't much difference.

AMN: And that technological advance didn't affect your art?

HVD: No, that's a slow technological advance. It just sneaks

in. But nevertheless, I never gave up looking. Not everything, but with particular things that needed very precise observations. That is what makes a film beautiful. Like a dancer that can't put her toes up quite all the way; if she can put her toes up all the way, that is beautiful. Otherwise, it's just so so.

AMN: Now the technological advance in editing is non-linear methods using computers. Are you curious about seeing what that's like?

HVD: It's there already, and I don't understand how they do it. Actually, I'm against computers. I threw one out. I bought one at the very beginning and that thing dominated me. It told me precisely how to do things, and I couldn't do it.

AMN: During the prewar period it might have been different, but after the war many editors were women...

HVD: Well, that's all that they were *allowed* to do. That's all they could get. They would start out by licking the film as an assistant to splice two shots together. The men wouldn't want to do that. All these things...

AMN: The dirty work!

HVD: The dirty work! Scraping, cementing, that's what women did. That's what I did, except that my real job was being the correspondent, but I fell by the wayside and reemerged as a filmmaker!

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