

acter on the screen and the individual in the audience has the same intensity and jarring emotional effect that one experiences when peering into the eyes of Munch's figures in such paintings as *The Voice*, *Self-Portrait with Burning Cigarette*, and most notably *Death in the Sickroom*, where Munch's sister, Inger, stares directly out at the viewer.

At present, Watkins is somewhat reluctant to discuss the possible impact of *Edvard Munch* on the genre of the biography film or all the complex reasons why he made the film, but he notes that "if there is any 'reason' needed to justify the film—it is because I knew, instinctively, that Edvard Munch himself—despite endless hardship and personal anguish, despite the acute repressiveness of his background and the social environment in which he worked—remained entirely true to himself, on every level of his existence, and let nothing stand in the way of his self-expression . . . It is on this level that I have tried to create this film—in recognition of the example that Edvard Munch set for me, and sets for all of us."

## NOTES

1. Gary Arnold, "Music Lovers," *Washington Post*, 25 February 1971, Section C, p. 14, cols 1-2.
2. The film, which was originally a Norsk Rikstringkasting/Sveriges Radio production, has been shown on European television in its original 3½ hour version. The theatrical version presently being screened in the United States was trimmed by Watkins himself to 2 hours and 45 minutes. All references in this essay are to the original version.
3. All of Watkins's comments are from his unpublished writings or interview-discussions with the author.
4. Reinhold Heller, *Munch: The Scream* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 36-7.
5. Nic. Stang, *Edvard Munch* (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tantom Forlag, 1972), p. 73.
6. Cited in Werner Timm, *The Graphic Art of Edvard Munch* (London: Studio Vista, 1973), pp. 29-30.
7. John Simon, "Suffering Artist, Smiling Dictator," *New York*, 13 September 1976, p. 90.
8. Cited in Oswald Doughty, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Victorian Romantic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. 5.
9. See the attack on *Lust for Life* in John Berger's *Permanent Red* (London: Methuen, c. 1960), pp. 33-8.

## BEN ACHTENBERG

# Helen van Dongen: An Interview

Although she produced and directed a number of films of her own, Helen van Dongen is primarily known as a documentary editor. She was one of the most active and best known documentary filmmakers working in the thirties and forties but is best remembered today as the associate producer and editor of Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story*. Most of her earlier films were done in collaboration with Dutch film-maker Joris Ivens; among these were *New Earth*, *The Spanish Earth*, *The Four Hundred Million* (about China) and *Power and the Land*, which was commissioned by Pare Lorentz for the Department of Agriculture. In *The Film Till Now*, Richard Griffith wrote of Ivens and van Dongen:

They worked on equal terms as joint creators, a collaboration which has been one of the most fruitful

in film history but which has tended to obscure Helen van Dongen's own quite distinct talent. That talent came into its own with the two war-record films, *Russians at War* and *News Review No. 2* of which she was producer as well as editor. These two films can be set against the Capra *Why We Fight* newsreel compilations on the one hand, and the Rotha argument films on the other, to indicate a third possible use of compiled material. . . . Both had the function of expressing the unity of the struggle for all participants however distant from one another. This binding together of human beings in a common enterprise was achieved almost without the aid of commentary. . . . The factor governing the editing was the *content of the shot*. . . . The theme arose wordlessly out of the material as edited. . . . No one at work today observes more subtly the implications and possibilities of isolated shots, nor has a surer instinct for the links between them.

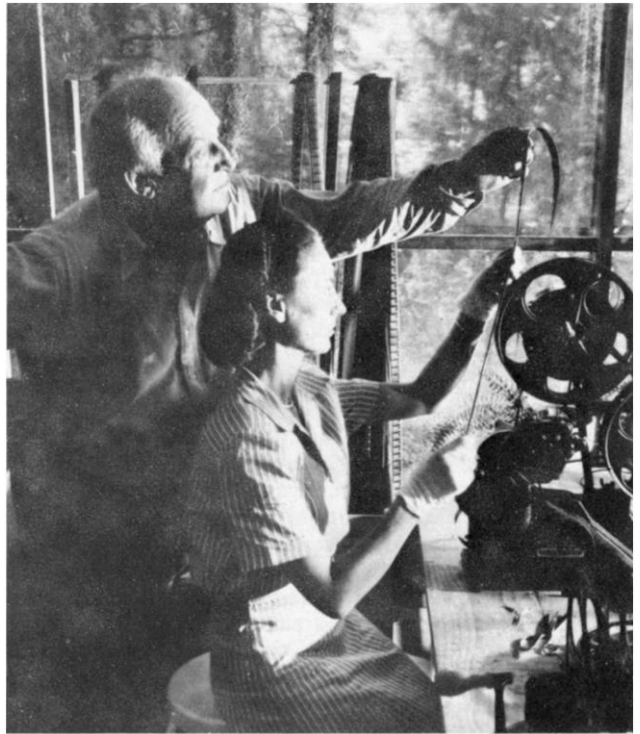
Although primarily concerned with the visual aspects of editing, van Dongen also devoted a great deal of time and study to sound recording and editing, and very early became noted among documentary film-makers for the complexity and effectiveness of her sound work. She also had a talent for eliciting superb music from composers, including Hanns Eisler and Virgil Thomson, and narration from writers who included John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and Stephen Vincent Benet. The result was an unusually well-integrated visual and aural counterpoint.

Helen van Dongen was born in 1909. She began work with Ivens around 1928 and retired from film-making in 1950. Many of the more than 30 films she worked on are still regarded as documentary classics. She now lives in Vermont, where she was interviewed in October, 1974.

BA: *How did you get started in film-making?*

HvD: My first introduction was by way of audience participation. That was in 1926, 1927—the flowering years of the European avant garde. Other than some newsreel and scientific production, there was not much of a film industry in Holland. Films shown in the theaters were primarily German or American imports. Yet in student circles and among the young intellectuals there was enough information that a great deal of cinematic experimentation was being done in Europe.

How does one get to the point where you say, “I won’t take this commercial slush any more. There *are* better films. Let’s find them, show them in private screenings, and invite the makers to discuss them.” A group of us, Joris Ivens, Menno ter Braak, Henry Scholte, Ed Pelster and others, organized a small group interested in seeing better films. A small contribution was paid to cover the costs of renting films and a projection hall called the Uitkyk (the Lookout) and paying for a one-day trip to Amsterdam for the film-makers to introduce and discuss their work. The first film ever shown was Pudovkin’s *The Mother*, and a stormy session it was. I don’t remember whether Pudovkin was present at that first showing; he certainly came in 1928. And with their films also came Eisenstein, Vertov, Hans Richter, Victor Eggeling, Germaine Dulac, René Clair, and many others. Being fluent in four languages



*Helen van Dongen working with Robert Flaherty during the shooting of LOUISIANA STORY*

I was soon drafted into translating the speakers’ introductory statements.

*You didn’t have any background in photography?*

Being around optical equipment [at the time van Dongen worked in Ivens’s father’s firm] I started to use still cameras out of curiosity. I already had to learn to operate a projector because lack of money for trial screenings prevented us from hiring professional projectionists. Eventually, because of necessity, I also had to learn to operate a film camera.

Of the founding group, Joris Ivens was the most film-minded. Apparently he *always* had a great interest in cameras and had made several short home movies. His father owned a wholesale optical equipment firm; Joris was destined to follow his father in the business. Unfortunately for the firm, Ivens was far more interested in using cameras than in selling them. He turned his theories of cinematography into practical film-making.

I myself had neither plans nor upbringing for a cinematographic career. As Ivens experimented I helped with everything. Lack of funds forced us

to make the most of primitive working conditions: winding large rolls of unexposed film onto small reels to be used in the Kinamo camera, developing and printing the film ourselves, splicing with a pair of scissors and a piece of glass. It all sounds so romantic now, and probably it was, despite working 24 hours around the clock. For me it was sheer serendipity, something I had not looked for and did not know I wanted. Obviously I had found the way in which I could really express myself. I have worked on all the aspects: cameraman, director, producer, editor, sound recorder—because these many years ago one was a film-maker, and not just a specialist in one part of it.

*What was the first film you worked on?*

Outside of some experimental films it was Ivens's *The Bridge*. Ivens himself had to learn about editing. He kept a very elaborate card system of every scene he shot, short sketches of the details of the bridge, the position of the bridge at that moment (open or closed or moving), the movement within the scene, camera movement, etc., etc. The editing was therefore partly done in the cards, which I studied very carefully. Overshooting was out of the question because of the cost; very little film was wasted. I kept the film scenes in the same order in the compartments of an egg box. For the rest I just watched and listened.

*Did you, at some point, make a choice to begin to emphasize editing?*

No. For a number of years I worked as a cameraman as well. Ivens would go away, yet certain things would have to be continued. There was for example the Zuiderzee project which, for many years, had to be recorded on film whenever something essential developed. If Ivens had to be away for other films he simply put me in charge. Or, as in the case of the film *Rain*, there might be a cloudburst while he was absent from Amsterdam. What else to do but to pick up a camera and record specific details which might be of interest to him? Each one understood what the other one wanted. We have been a team for many years.

With films like *Bridge*, *Rain*, *Zuiderzee*, there is no script other than a certain natural progression, but there are ten thousand ways in which you can develop that dramatically. In the early days film-makers, aside from having to be good

cameramen, simply *had to be editors*. There was no play or no dialogue to depend on. It was purely and simply a *visual* development, knowing how to read the content of a scene, knowing where it wants to be in a film because of its inner content, the juxtaposition it needs to other scenes to reveal its full value. That, essentially, *is* film-making. So I consider myself a film-maker, not just an editor.

I also took up independent work. What eventually became the short film *New Earth* started as a film about the building of the dike to close off the Zuiderzee from the North Sea, an elaborate project, a long film to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Guild of Construction Workers. Many subjects were covered: pile-driving, home construction, architecture, anything that had to do with the skills and crafts of those who were members of the Guild. The most ambitious of the films was the one recording the building of the dike itself, but since the building of the dike spanned so many years I made several films out of the enormous amount of film shot.

*Was New Earth the first film in which you were working with stock footage as well as material you and your crew had shot?*

Yes. But actually there are very few stock shots. Some of the scenes which look like stock footage were shot by us in re-enactment. We bought a few sacks of wheat and burned it, and filmed that. The milk being thrown away, yes, that is stock footage, and so are the scenes of the stock exchange crash.

There are several versions of *New Earth*. The one now ending with the economic crash, accompanied by Hanns Eisler's song, was not planned like that originally. It grew out of the economic-political situation in Holland and the rest of the world. At the time we thought it was a fantastic idea, but when I saw the film again a few years ago I realized that it is just an ending hung onto the film for a purpose. It jars. If you want to use a film as a political stick you have to use it at the appropriate time. The time then was probably right; it was right during the Depression. But it is also true that, Depression or no Depression, when an enormous project like the draining of the Zuiderzee is finished then you do get immediately a great number of unemployed unless the government or private industry takes precautions well

ahead of time to transfer workers from one project to another. I was too young at the time to be very politically or economically aware. I was not really a student of politics, but I was aware that, yes, 20,000 workers are suddenly out of a job. How are they going to make a living?

In addition, at this point I began to be aware and concerned with the plight of people and not just involved with the building of a beautiful and terrific dike. The construction of a dike and the fight against the sea are fascinating and wonderful but one can get lost in formalism that way and forget about the fact that people built this dike. From childhood I had no more background in politics or economics than I had in film-making. Why this development? I do not know. Things just happen to me. When I was aware of what happened I just pursued it; but I am not a political activist.

*Do you think there is something about the making of documentary films that tends to lead one toward human concerns?*

Does one get into the making of documentary films because one is aware of economics, politics, and humanity, or vice versa? I do not know. I think it goes both ways. Working within the documentary field it is rather difficult to remain aloof from humanity without becoming purely formalistic in one's approach. If I had not been working in films I would probably do the same thing through writing or painting.

*When I saw New Earth recently I thought it seemed very pertinent to today. There were the grain-burning scenes and the week before there had been scenes on television of Wisconsin farmers slaughtering calves because they couldn't get the prices they needed.*

Scenes like that are symbols of a deeper economic and political illness. They are used to make part of the population aware of what is happening in the land. I also feel that we are getting so saturated with them that they lose their impact. One forgets immediately. And it is not just the farmers who are getting the short end; everyone is involved.

When I saw *New Earth* about two years ago I remembered how beautiful the film *could* be when one takes enough time to develop the theme of the dike building and show the people who do the

building. Then if, after sufficient time, you are told that they are now all unemployed, you have more compassion. Instead, in its present form, all the aspects of the dike building are reduced to their essentials; all of a sudden the dam is closed and then, whammy, comes the shouting voice telling you that 20,000 workers after so many years of labor are now unemployed. The intention was to jar you into reality. In a way it does, but I think it could have been done better and with a more lasting effect by not using the sledge-hammer method. I know why it was done this way and I worked on it myself, but I do not think any longer that this was the right way of doing it, artistically. I can think of different ways which could have been more effective. It was in the beginning of using film as a political weapon, though, and as such it served probably a very good purpose.

*You said that you had a very close working relationship with Ivens; can you compare that with working with Flaherty?*

My collaboration with Ivens was so close that, for instance, in *Power and the Land*, I finished the editing, worked with Douglas Moore on the music and with Stephen Vincent Benet on the text, did the whole recording and finished the editing and mixing while Ivens was filming in Colorado. An occasional phone-call was sufficient.

With Flaherty I only made two films: *The Land*, as editor, and *Louisiana Story*, as producer and being responsible for the editorial composition—I had two editors working with me. During *The Land* it was unknown territory to me. During *Louisiana Story*, when I knew Flaherty somewhat better, it was a completely different relationship. One had to be very careful with Flaherty, who wanted everything just *his* way. Any innocent suggestion *sounded* to him like interference, which is all right; but he distrusted any kind of independence. No, that is not quite the right word, because I was independent as an editor, but Flaherty would not let a day go by without demanding to see everything that had been done, even if it was only putting rushes in order.

*I have the sense that Flaherty really always preferred things the way they were for Nanook—to be off on his own with a camera and not have to worry about anyone else. That he resisted having to have an editor or a cameraman.*

As film-making became more and more complex he needed a crew, collaborators who could work independently and contribute their knowledge. This sounds like a contradiction to what I said before and it was. He had quite a struggle with it in his own mind. To get someone competent, who could do the work technically as well as artistically, to hold the ropes tight and yet, when necessary, abdicate "authority." It must have been difficult for him.

*It was so much Flaherty's style to go to a place, experience it, and find a story there. He couldn't really do that on The Land. Was the way the film was made imposed by the government, was it just his own difficulty with the material, or what?*

If you have to make a film about migratory workers who move from crop to crop you can hardly settle down and dream up a story—you shoot as you follow them. Another problem was that, as he once said, "I am not here to show misery and degradation; I want to show the beauty of life." In all his previous films it was Flaherty who set the rules of life. Here he had to take it as he found it and it was not beautiful.

I think Flaherty would have been a very good archivist. If a society would have made use of him, given him sufficient money and the commission: "All right, shoot what you see," in a place with a cultural background attractive to him, he would have made a marvellous record of a way of life. I don't mean an edited film. Store it in the archives as it was shot, unedited, no story line. He could look at the rushes of a film endlessly, just the way they came out of the camera, and say, "Oh God, it's going to be beautiful." But he jealously guarded each frame, hated to part with any scene, loathed "organizing" scenes into a logical development. The dream of beauty was forever in his mind.

*On Louisiana Story he must have known more clearly what he was after.*

There were many unpredictables during the shooting which affected the ultimate form of the story. It is not my favorite way of making a film; an awful lot of time is wasted by pursuing digressions. Had Flaherty lived I would probably never have made another film with him. I liked him very much as a person and I have no regrets that I worked with him on *Louisiana Story*, but I had no intention of being tied down so long on one film,

especially not a fable. However, there are certain sections of the film which I think I can call *mine*: the introduction and especially the section which is usually referred to as the "ballet of the rough-necks" (the drilling pipes going down the hole). Those, I can freely say, are my creations. Naturally I contributed a great deal to the editing of the rest of the film.

Collaboration is, at best, a very difficult situation. The more you want to be yourself the less you find it possible to be a collaborator and subject part of yourself to someone else's work. With Ivens it worked because we complemented each other and he did not worry about what was my contribution and it did not interfere with his film-making. But I am neither Ivens nor Flaherty, and my own films are different from theirs.

*One thing that surprised me in your Film Quarterly article [Summer 1965] was how little contact Flaherty seemed to have with the local people. It doesn't fit the Flaherty legend.*

Legend indeed. I too was the victim of this portrait of a man who, essentially, was very lonely. It was a tremendous disappointment to me and one of the difficulties of staying in Louisiana so long. He had this life completely isolated from the community in which we lived. We were complete outsiders, never saw anybody except those who worked for us. I described this in my article shortly after he died, and it describes him better than anything I could remember now, 25 years later.

In New York City it was the same, because in New York he would just hold court in the Coffee House. He would call up everyone. As long as he had money everybody would get free dinners and free drinks. The moment he was poor he wouldn't see a soul. I thought he had very few friends—real friends. He had a lonely life, or so I think.

Flaherty also was an extremely possessive person; he set the rules and most people took it and eventually suffered from it. I was sufficiently stubborn and had enough of a mind of my own to say "No" and resist his rules, but it didn't make life very much easier because he would get cross. If you didn't do and say what he wanted he could be just about as petulant as a spoiled child. Yet he would give the shirt off his back to you. He was a very strange combination.

You can't sit in the same house and sulk all day because nobody gets anything done. I didn't contribute anything under such conditions. Twice I had enough. I went to New York for a couple of weeks, said, "If you cannot talk to me or say 'Good morning,' I cannot work with you and you do not need me. Call me when you want me." And he would take his time about it, but after three weeks he would call: "When are you coming back?" He really could be a pain in the neck, but, you know, he was a good person and he always remained a good friend.

*Many things written about Flaherty still treat him as the father of documentary. Nobody really talks about what he was doing, which in some ways was not documentary at all, as most of us use the term.*

Some of the confusion arises because "documentary" is a confusing word, a catch-all for almost anything that is not straight fiction. To me Flaherty is *not* a documentarian; he makes it all up. He does use the documentary style and background but, except for *The Land*, they are all, to a degree, stories. He sets back the clock a hundred years if this suits him, so that living conditions, clothes (or no clothes) and weapons look more historic, not to say more romantic. Certainly the Eskimos at one time had to literally fight for survival, but by the time Flaherty came to Eskimo-land they already bought their guns and gramophones at the local trading post. I have no quarrel whatsoever with the way he makes his films. They are part of our history of film-making, but I do hesitate to call them documentaries. They are Flaherty-films, and worthwhile enjoying.

*The sequence of the roughnecks was shot twice, wasn't it? Once in the daytime?*

An oil-drilling well is just a dirty, filthy place. Thousands of feet of film were shot to show how the pipes were pulled up, stacked, and finally the drill-bit changed. Then the reverse, the pipes re-assembled and sunk into the pit. I worked and worked but could not get anything exciting out of it. The whole thing fell flat. But they worked also at night under tremendous floodlights. I do not remember whose idea it was to go back at night; in any case the night shooting produced some of the most exciting film material I have seen. It was

like a land of enchantment, just the atmosphere we needed for a fable.

The sounds that are used were recorded on the rig, on discs, by Benji Donniger, the sound cameraman. I asked him to record everything, the general sounds, the individual sounds—to put the microphone everywhere. Tape recorders were not yet in existence. We used a disc recorder because of the difficulty of getting constant electricity, the distance from source of power to the recorder being rather long. It couldn't be used as it was, so I had to re-record all that onto film separately in a recording studio before I could even start working with it. Some of it had to be slowed down a little because of the unevenness of the electricity.

This sequence had to be edited in New York, where I took it because we had no sound equipment in Louisiana. Flaherty was a little suspicious about that because it meant that I was out of his control. It was very hard for me to explain to him that if you look at the film without the sound some of it is not there—it isn't just half, it's that the whole quality changes. To tell Flaherty that in so many words was just impossible. He just had to see it when it was done. And then he liked it very much, and even was very excited about it.

*Your sound work is one of the most striking things about your editing.*

I have been known for my sound innovations, if you can call it that, ever since *Industrial Symphony*, also known as *Philips Radio*. No, ever since the original *Zuiderzee* film, where I analyzed sounds, breaking them down into their separate parts and then reassembling them. I have done a great deal of research in sound, the use of sound, the components, their use—what does one sound consist of.

*Can you give an example?*

If, for instance, you walk over a bridge in Amsterdam you would hear general city noises. If you record that on film you have only a general noise. But if you record separately, in close-up so to speak, a streetcar passing over the bridge, clanging of the bicycle bells, whistle of the streetcar conductor, claxons of cars, the tune of a street fiddler, a fish vendor hawking his wares, tooting of boats passing underneath, urchins yelling, squeaking brakes, crackling of sparks on the electric wires, a train coming out of the station—

then you have so many components with which to orchestrate the sounds of a city and give them meaning and dramatic impact. And do not forget *silence* which is also a sound.

Or if a chimney would fall down, you get a crash, but what is a crash? A crash is a great number of individual sounds. Some of them you can recreate in a studio and then put them together to get the sound of a crash which is far more impressive than the sound of a real crash. I was doing this breaking down of sounds almost from the beginning of sound film. I was laughed at by many a sound engineer who then, after weeks of trying, got terribly interested in the process. And then I would get cooperation, but not until I demanded things of them.

Even a scream, like one of the screams in *Spanish Earth*—there were two or three different sounds to give that horrendous scream of the woman when the bombardment comes. And that is what really does give it this quality. I think, although I don't like electronic music, that it's a little like that—a combination of things that you have to invent and make, reassemble, and finally you get the effect which is what you want.

*Someone wrote that the battle effects in Spanish Earth were among the most effective ever done until that time.*

Those were done in a similar way, as were those in my films *New Review No. 2* and *Russians at War*. I tired of seeing so many war films which went continuously "Bang, bang," relentlessly, without nuances. If you do not break it down into separate parts, use silence to create effects, you are subjected to one continuous noise which no longer has any effect and certainly has nothing to do with proper film-making.

*Can you talk about your use of Hemingway's voice in Spanish Earth and then Flaherty's in Louisiana Story? Particularly at that time, it was much more common to find films using—like the March of Time films—a "voice of God" narrator, with the big booming voice. . . .*

The *March of Times* were not films, they were illustrated lectures over the voice of doom. If you silenced the voice and screened the picture there was no film that made any sense, just a random succession of scenes which illustrated the voice.

For *Spanish Earth* the commentary was written

by Ernest Hemingway. It was important at the time to get "names" connected with the film, and we were to use Orson Welles, who was at the height of his radio fame at that time. Orson Welles was, indeed, the "voice of God," demanding all the attention, clashing with the pictures. As far as I was concerned it wrecked the film. I asked Hemingway why he couldn't read his own narration. He didn't want to, didn't have a trained voice. That was a poor excuse. "If you can write it you can read it," I told him. He did, and it was wonderful.

Flaherty's was a different case. The narrator had carefully listened to Flaherty's narration. Flaherty is a master of the spoken story, each cadence, each inflection is just so. Once he has it right it stays that way never mind how often he tells the story. It is like a musical performance. And all we could get out of the professional narrator was someone imitating Flaherty. Even Flaherty didn't like it, but he wouldn't do the narration on my request either. He can be so self-conscious. Finally I urged him to record it only temporarily, so that we had something to work with, and when all was in place we could show it to a different narrator and record the new voice. Well, he did that, and Flaherty's voice remained on the film in spite of the fact that the level is not always the same. I don't think it could be any better. It is not the perfection of the voice that does it, it is the inflection. Sound film is not just sound and picture. It is the amalgamation and fusion of many different details that gives it a quality all its own.

*I wish you would talk about the films you made on your own, apart from Ivens or Flaherty.*

For the US Signal Corps I did one of Capra's series, *Know Your Enemy Japan*. It was a compilation film, a short-lived project because at that time no one in charge was sure any more what we were going to do with Japan. The whole thing sort of collapsed and I wasn't sorry—you were handed an enormous scenario which had to be illustrated.

When I left the Signal Corps, the Office of War Information immediately asked me to make a film about total war on all fronts with the working title (which became permanent) *News Review No. 2*. Compilation film is something I like to do enormously provided one has enough material to work

with. In this case I could draw from every foot of film that came from the camera of every war photographer. Millions upon millions of feet. It was a pretty tremendous subject to be covered. In a way I faced the same problem as in the Capra unit. Phil Dunne, a Hollywood producer, was in charge and he started the Hollywood way, with story conferences and scripts to be written before you can make a film. I was straining at the leash. All I wanted was to look at film; history itself was my story writer. I didn't need a lot of narration or dialogue. But how do you go about telling an important Hollywood producer that the story is already written in the film as it comes from the fronts? I sat through many a story conference, endlessly confused as to its purpose, and I must have looked like a dummy. I would just discard all the "stories" I was handed and proceed my own way.

You had to keep up, constantly, over a period of a year and a half, with the war effort on all fronts as it appeared in the papers and magazines and on film. Which was quite complicated because you never knew what might become an important battle and what might end up as a side event.

And I did not want it to become a story of war machines. No gun shoots itself; there is a man behind every gun. It was a global war, where soldiers and civilians were involved. I wanted to show the war fought, suffered, and won by people. Sometimes the emphasis in the film is entirely on faces. Naturally there are also sequences of mechanical warfare, but never without the people behind it.

And thanks to Phil Dunne, he let me be. We decided to stop with the Normandy invasion and then add an epilogue. When the visual part was as far advanced as possible without sound I asked for and got—again thanks to Phil Dunne, who probably never understood why I did not use his lengthy scripts—the collaboration of Frances and Albert Hackett, famous Hollywood writers who had never before written commentary for a documentary but who were tremendously interested when I explained what I wanted. I said, "Come and see the film. I want not to underline: if you say something and the film shows it too, the one kills the other. I want an additional dimension to it, where you can add things that are not shown.

For example, if you have a tremendous row of miserable Germans coming out of Moscow I don't want you to say that here are so many prisoners of war and so on. I want you to add something—that these people were invaders and they got the worst of it." So, what they came up with, all it says is "Well, we didn't *invite* you. . . ." You see, they understood almost immediately what I wanted. And no one else could have done a better job than they did.

I seem to have a knack for this kind of filmmaking. One has to know how to *read* scenes. If you theorize about the order of certain scenes nothing much will happen. You must take time, dig and dig into the possible contents of a scene, like an archeologist who has to put together a story out of the minute little pieces he finds, being able to separate true from fake—if you can put that amount of time and knowledge into the reading of scenes as they come out of the camera, then the scene will tell *you* by what it wants to be preceded and by what followed.

You cannot always control yourself. There seems to be a necessity at times for some *order*. You also have to have a fantastic memory for what you have seen somewhere because you are playing around with millions of feet of film. If, all of a sudden, at a certain point in the film you expect a certain scene to appear and it is not there, you know that you are on the right track. Go and find it somewhere and put it in because that is where it belongs.

There are the usual ABC's of editing, about directions within the shot, movement of the shot, critical length of scenes. This is merely technique. Anyone can learn that. It comes later, after your dramatic content is in order. It is secondary to composing your pictures.

*Did you do any films after Louisiana Story?*

Almost always after working strenuously for two or three years I liked to take a year off. After *Louisiana Story* I went to Europe for 18 months to do a research project. When I returned to New York the Film Division of the United Nations asked me to make a short film about the Declaration of Human Rights. It is called *Of Human Rights*, is two reels long and, except for parts which are stock shots, is entirely shot in a studio. I was producer, director, and editor. That was my



last film. As soon as that was finished Kenneth Durant and I were married and I dropped everything.

*What films or scenes do you feel represent your most successful work?*

I must first of all define "successful." Successful in terms of artistic achievement in my own eyes. This does not always coincide with what reviewers or others think. I like especially a short sequence (or rather two) in *Spanish Earth*, where the irrigation of the village is being completed and, later on, the bombardment of Madrid. I don't think *The Land* has anything which is particularly mine. There are certain indications of my style, but the film scatters over too many things to have time to develop. In *Louisiana Story*, certainly the introductory sequence and the oil-drilling sequence. And *Zuiderzee*—not *New Earth*, but *Zuiderzee* as it used to be in the long version. It is inevitable that there are things in there which are mine, but you can't separate them because if you have a very close working relationship you work together and fuse each other's styles. Who has done exactly what? Does it matter as long as the film is good? But my own films, I mean the ones I have done from beginning to end, such as *Spain in Flames*, *Russians at War*, *News Review No. 2*, *Of Human Rights*, etc.—those are me. Anything you do not like in those films you know that it is I who have either done it or not done it.

*Spain in Flames was a compilation film?*

It was the first compilation film on the Spanish Civil War. It is a short, only two reels, with commentary by John Dos Passos. It is not very good because we lacked money, time, and sufficient film to work with, but it was badly needed at the time. I am afraid that the film which I like best, *News Review No. 2*, does not exist anymore. Our government has the bad habit of dismantling films after they have fulfilled their purpose, using each scene as a stock shot, filing them under their subject matter. We have been unsuccessful in finding a copy since the end of the war.

*Most of the films you have been involved in have been aimed at changing people's minds in some way, getting them to take an interest or to take action in some situation. Do you think it works? Do you think films can do that? Do you think the*

*films you have done have been effective in those terms?*

It has never been my intention to *change* people's minds; my only intention was to make people *think* about certain situations. After that, they should make up their own minds, after they have become *aware*. If I have achieved this some of the time then my work has been successful.

I have been called two things: one, an activist, and two, a "premature anti-fascist," which was a dirty word at that time. I am not now and never was an activist in the political sense. I certainly was not in agreement with the policies of Hitler, Hirohito, or Mussolini. That makes me an anti-fascist, but how can you be a *premature* anti-fascist? Is it all right to be one *after* Hitler slaughtered millions of Jews or Japan attacked Pearl Harbor? I am not a soap-boxer, but I *am* tremendously interested in what happens to people, *all* people, be it in war or during the law-and-order regime of Watergate. In the long run it concerns us all.

I and a few others were among those who, through the medium of film, were warning people about impending dangers which eventually would engulf the whole world. That is my attitude toward humanity; if I know that something is wrong I tried, through film, to send out warnings and make people think about what was happening. We did not win any big victories with our films, nor win any wars, nor even avoid them, but maybe we were successful to a degree in making people think about what was happening.

*You may have seen the recent interview of Leni Riefenstahl in which she disclaimed any attempt at propaganda and said that essentially all she did was to document what happened—in Triumph of the Will, I mean. . . .*

It was excellent propaganda. But there is another film which is called *Behind the Triumph of the Will*, which shows the organization of the enormous gatherings, the flags and banners, the parades, the camera setups and all the other facilities to film the Nazi rally. Certainly excellent use of the cinematographic medium. From a fascist point of view the film had enormous power to whip up thousands of people into a frenzy, but so did Hitler's speeches. Do you give Hitler a medal for that? The film was a *weapon*, but was

it film art? It is very difficult. I have never been able to define precisely where propaganda begins and art is left behind. As a weapon, *Triumph of the Will* is terrific. If you had been unemployed a long time and had fascist tendencies and you saw this film you probably put on the brown shirt when you came home.

Is *Borinage* a good film or a piece of propaganda? Photographically and technically it is not very good, because it was made under very difficult conditions. Ivens often said that the photography *should not* be beautiful because it did not fit the subject. Whatever is shown in the film was actually true. The film had great value because it showed the plight of the miners in the Borinage, the strike and the police terror, the mismanagement of the mines, etc., and yet, as cinematography is it art? I have seen better films. I don't think it always matters much, as long as you are not after medals.

*In the film Antonia, by Jill Godmilow and Judy Collins, your countrywoman, orchestra conductor Antonia Brico, talks about the things that have prevented her from playing her "instrument," the orchestra. Film-making is a lot like conducting, in that you have to assemble great resources and numbers of people. I wondered whether you had ever been prevented from working as much as you would have liked, or on the kind of things you would have liked to do, either because of the problems of raising money or because of prejudice against you as a woman.*

I saw the film recently on television [apparently the abridged sections aired on CBS's "60 Minutes" program] and it sounded like a story we are hearing recently over and over again: discrimination against women. I have never experienced it. Not being able to raise money for certain projects is a problem all artists meet from time to time. Speaking only for myself, I never had any trouble finding films to make; there was always more than I could or wanted to handle. Ever since I began working in films my contemporaries have been men, and most of them were ten to fifteen years my senior. Yet no one ever seems to have had any objection to my joining them and no one ever told me that I was only a woman. The problem just did not come up. I neither asked for nor gave quarter. I never considered myself doing a man's job. Who ever decided that it was a man's

job? I did what I wanted to do, not because it was a man's job. The fact that I am a woman is irrelevant. I never thought that I was doing something extraordinary. The only thing that was extraordinary was that I broke out of my family environment and started to work, but once having made that break, all that followed did not make the least bit of difference—not to me nor to anyone else outside of my family.

In private life I have no objections when men hold the door open for me or take off their hats. That is a woman's prerogative. I like it and it makes me feel good. But when I work, I work, with man or woman, they are all alike. It is the work that counts, and the result, not whether it is done by a man or a woman. Have you ever heard of a man-pianist, a man-painter or a man-musician? There is no such animal. Nor are there woman-composers or women-artists.

I never worked in the Hollywood "industry," though. It is quite possible that you find there discrimination against women, but I have never been in that situation.

If I had to do it all over again I would do exactly what I have been doing, with one exception, something I only thought about a few days ago. Now that I am advancing in years with relatively little time left compared to the time I have lived, I wish that I had taken off more time to take courses in certain subjects, had more time to read. I do not have enough time left to learn all the things I still want to know. When I worked I worked awfully hard, without time for other things. That is why, after two or three years I would always take off for about a year, doing research, and refresh my mind. But, having come to the point where I am now, I'll never have time to catch up on all the things I want to know.

#### CAREER AND FILMOGRAPHY

Helen van Dongen began her film career as general assistant and pupil of Joris Ivens on his films *De Brug* (*The Bridge*, completed in 1928, a study of the railroad bridge over the Maas River in Rotterdam) and *Regen* (*Rain*, 1929, the city and people of Amsterdam during a rain shower). She also did some of the camera work for *Rain*. During 1929–30, she was Ivens's assistant editor on *Wy Bouwen* (*We Are Building*), a film commissioned for the 25th Anniversary celebration of the

Dutch Construction Workers' Union, as well as on three subsidiary films produced as part of the same project: *Heien (Pile Driving)*, *Nieuwe Architecture*, and *Zuiderzee*.

She spent six months at the Tobis Klangfilm Studios in Paris (and later three months at UFA in Berlin) studying sound recording and soundtrack editing. She then returned to Holland to edit Ivens's *Phillips Radio* (also known as *Industrial Symphony*, 1931). This was one of the first commercially sponsored industrial documentaries, and is still noted for its early creative use of sound. Van Dongen also resumed work as one of the camera operators filming the building of the Zuiderzee dike. For the Netherlands Government, she edited two silent "record" films from this material, *The Zuiderzee Dike* and *Nieuwe Polders*, which deals with the land reclamation efforts. (In 1933, she produced a third of these "record" films, this one dealing with the first cultivation of the reclaimed polders.) She was assistant editor, with Jean Dreville, of Ivens's *Creosoot*, a documentary-cum-advertising film on the manufacture and uses of creosote.

For Ivens's *Zuiderzee*, Van Dongen combined material from *Wy Bouwen* with additional footage shot over a three-year period in order to show the entire dike building and land reclamation project. Later, in *Nieuwe Gronden (New Earth)*, 1934, she combined footage of the reclamation work with archival and other material in a dramatic denunciation of the economic crisis which followed the completion of the drainage project. The music for *New Earth* was composed by Hanns Eisler.

Under Ivens's supervision, Van Dongen edited the original version of *Borinage* (Belgium, 1933) and subsequently edited and recorded the Russian version. This film, shot under difficult and hazardous conditions by Ivens and Henry Storck, was a grim look at the conditions of Belgian coal miners following the repression of a strike in the Borinage district.

In 1934, Van Dongen returned to Paris, where she observed productions in progress at Joinville and assisted several producers and directors, including Tual and Marcel l'Herbier. In Paris she edited Hans Richter's *Daily Life*: "A short film about daily life with all its repetitions, from very dull to very exciting, routine movements. Part of the film was realistic, part abstract. Edited rhythmically." The film was in silent version only, because no funds were available for sound.

From June, 1934, to June, 1936, Van Dongen studied with Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, and others at the Academy of Cinematography in Moscow. She also lectured there as an expert on editing, and worked as assistant director and editor of *Borza (The Struggle)*, a film by Gustav von Wagenheim on the facts behind the Reichstag fire in Berlin. After leaving Moscow, she visited Hollywood studios for several months to study

American techniques of production, directing, and sound recording.

In New York, Van Dongen produced and edited *Spain in Flames* (1936), with narration by John Dos Passos, the first of several compilation films on the Spanish Civil War. It was followed a year later by *Spanish Earth*, directed by Ivens and photographed by Ivens and Ferno in Spain. Helen van Dongen was again Ivens's collaborator and editor on this film, the story of a Spanish village whose efforts to irrigate their newly acquired land are paralleled with Spain's fight for freedom against the fascists. The music was arranged by Virgil Thomson and Marc Blitzstein.

Van Dongen's next film in collaboration with Ivens was *The 400 Million*, the epic of Chinese resistance to the Japanese invasion in 1937. It was filmed on location in China, under extremely difficult conditions, by Ivens, John Ferno, and Robert Capa. It was narrated by Dudley Nichols and scored by Hanns Eisler. Following this Van Dongen produced, directed, and photographed a very different kind of film, *You Can Draw* (1938) based on a book by Frances O'Brien Garfield. It was shot with the pupils and during art classes in the Brewster, New York, elementary schools.

During this same period (1937-39), she worked as a producer on a variety of films for educational purposes. Some used scenes from Hollywood features to promote discussion of "human relations." The unfinished *We Who Made America* (1939—directed and edited by Van Dongen) dealt with immigrant contributions. *Pete-Roleum* (1939) was a color puppet-animation film for the NY World's Fair; produced by Joseph Losey, it was directed, and the animation designed, by Van Dongen, with music by Hanns Eisler.

*Power and the Land* (1939-40) was produced for the Department of Agriculture, and was, with the exception of the never-completed *Know Your Enemy Japan*, Van Dongen's last collaboration with Joris Ivens. Photographed by Floyd Crosby and Arthur Ornitz, with music by Douglas Moore and an effective narration by Stephen Vincent Benet, the film illustrates the importance of rural electrification to the American farmer, as seen by one Ohio farm family.

The first of Van Dongen's films with Robert Flaherty was *The Land*, produced in 1940-41, again for the Department of Agriculture, but never distributed. It dealt with migratory workers, and was considered outdated when the entrance of the US into the war created increased employment, as well as changing the national mood.

In 1942, Van Dongen made *Russians at War*, the first of her highly regarded wartime compilation films. It is the story of the war on the Russian front and behind the lines, filmed by Russian military cameramen. The

following year she made *Netherlands America* and *Peoples of Indonesia* for the Netherlands Information Office in New York. During this period she was also chief film editor on a project of then Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs, Nelson Rockefeller, which proposed to use film to enlighten the underdeveloped countries of Latin America by bringing them American culture and "know-how." Van Dongen was unhappy with the propaganda line of the project, and left it after a short time to edit *Know Your Enemy Japan* for the Army Signal Corps. Directed by Ivens, with a scenario by Ivens and Carl Foreman, the film nonetheless derived most of its power from Van Dongen's effective selection and editing of newsreel and other footage. The film was eventually discontinued because of policy shifts toward Japan and the Pacific war.

Van Dongen regards *News Review No. 2* (1944-45) as the most successful of the wartime films she directed and edited. It was produced by Philip Dunn for the OWI, and had narration by Frances and Albert Hackett. Compiled from all the footage coming in from combat cameramen on all battle fronts, the film communicated the unity of human struggle.

Toward the end of the war, Joris Ivens was appointed Film Commissioner for the Netherlands East Indies and Helen van Dongen was made Deputy Commissioner. She was to be in charge of short film production, planned a film school to develop Indonesian film-makers, and was given the interim responsibility of procuring laboratory and studio equipment in New York while waiting for the Japanese to be driven out of the islands. The project was shelved when, after the liberation, the Dutch government resisted the demand of the Indonesians for an independent nation. (Ivens, who was then in Australia, tore up his contract with the government and produced instead *Indonesia Calling!*, on the refusal of Sydney dockworkers to load arms for the Dutch to use against the Indonesians.)

There followed *Calligraphy* (1946), a project with Robert Flaherty which had to be discontinued for lack of funds, and *Gift of Green*, which was begun by David Flaherty, Robert's brother, and was completed, edited, and scored by Helen van Dongen; this was a 16mm color film explaining the process of chlorophyll production and produced by the Sugar Research Foundation.

On Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1946-48), Van Dongen was associate producer as well as being in charge of the editing (with assistant editor Ralph Rosenblum). The cameraman was Richard Leacock, and Virgil Thomson composed the music.

During the following year, which she spent in Europe doing research, Van Dongen did a BBC broadcast on the music for *Louisiana Story* and wrote the material which appears as the eighth chapter of Karel Reisz's

*The Technique of Film Editing* and includes a complete analysis of the pastoral opening sequence and the oil-drilling sequence from *Louisiana Story*.

Back in New York, Van Dongen produced, directed, and edited her final film, *Of Human Rights* (1949-50), for the United Nations. While some stock material was used in this film, most of it was shot in the studio with Hollywood actress Dorothy Petersen, New York stage actor Howard Vierum, and an advanced class at New York's PS 35.

In May, 1950, Helen van Dongen married Kenneth Durant and retired from film-making.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The best readily available description of the film projects on which Helen van Dongen worked in collaboration with Joris Ivens is found in Ivens's autobiographical *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969). The book tends to concentrate on the shooting, on the work in the field, and to under-emphasize the contribution of editing and post-production.

Her work with Robert Flaherty is better documented. In Karel Reisz's *The Technique of Film Editing* (London & New York: Focal Press, 1958 and later revisions), the chapter on "Imaginative Documentary" consists primarily of Van Dongen's notes on *Louisiana Story*. Her complete notes on the editing of that film are in the MOMA Film Library. Van Dongen discussed the experience of working with Flaherty in an article "Robert Flaherty 1884-1951," which was published in *Film Quarterly*, Summer, 1965.

Also written by Helen van Dongen:

—Joris Ivens. *Festschrift der Staatlichen Film Archiv der DDR, Berlin*, 1963.

— "Notes on Louisiana Story," "Robert Flaherty," and "Tonschnitt bei Louisiana Story," three articles published in *Robert Flaherty*. (Berlin: Henschell Verlag.)  
— "350,000 Feet of Film," in *The Cinema 1951*, by Roger Manvell. (London: Penguin Books, 1951.)

Photographs, manuscripts, notes, and other materials about the earlier productions are in the Netherlands Film Museum, Amsterdam.