

## JORIS IVENS

### THE MAKING OF *RAIN* (1969)

It took more than one film to teach me to work with actors, but the important accomplishments for me in this film were some successes in photographic ingenuity. In order to film the movement of the sea and the surf in a dramatic, subjective way I constructed a rubber sack with a glass front to contain my head and arms and camera. This enabled me to shoot while breakers rolled over my camera and myself, producing shots of sea movement with a violent quality that nobody had seen before on the screen.

Mannus Franken did much of the direction for me. It was good training to work with faces and human features and with reactions so soon after the mechanized movements on *The Bridge*. Creating certain moods of a fishing community in a minimum of shots was a challenging problem for a young film maker: a lone dog in an empty street; a sleepy pan-shot along the straight lines of the tiny roofs; a single child in a spotless court; a line of dignified fishermen walking stiffly in their black Sunday clothes against the white austere architecture of the village church. For us *Breakers* was a good film—although I remember that we thought the Filmliga audiences

didn't like it because they had become a bit snobbish.

My next film started from a far more trivial motive. While on location for *Breakers* we needed the sun, instead we got rain—those long days of rain that you have in Holland. The idea—let's make a film about the damn rain—came quite naturally.

Although this idea arose almost as a joke, when I returned to Amsterdam I talked it over with Mannus Franken who sketched an outline. We discussed and revised the outline many times until it became a film for both of us. Unfortunately, Mannus Franken lived in Paris, so the shooting in Amsterdam was done by me alone. Franken however, came to Amsterdam for a short time to assist in the editing.

In making such a film of atmosphere, I found that you couldn't stick to the script and that the script should not get too detailed. In this case, the rain itself dictated its own literature and guided the camera into secret wet paths we had never dreamed of when we outlined the film. It was an unexpectedly difficult subject to tackle. Many artistic problems were actually technical problems and vice versa. Film experience in photographing rain was extremely

limited because a normal cameraman stops filming when it begins to rain. When *Rain* was finished and shown in Paris the French critics called it a *ciné-poem* and its structure is actually more that of a poem than the prose of *The Bridge*. Its object is to show the changing face of a city, Amsterdam, during a shower.

The film opens with clear sunshine on houses, canals, and people in the streets. A slight wind rises and the first drops of rain splash into the canals. The shower comes down harder and the people hasten about their business under the protection of capes and umbrellas. The shower ends. The last drops fall and the city's life returns to normal. The only continuity in *Rain* is the beginning, progress, and end of this shower. There are neither titles nor dialogue. Its effects were intended as purely visual. The actors are the rain, the raindrops, wet people, dark clouds, glistening reflections moving over wet asphalt, and so forth. The diffused light on the dark houses along the black canals produced an effect that I never expected. And the whole film gives the spectator a very personal, and subjective vision. As in the lines of Verlaine:

*Il pleure dans mon cœur,  
Comme il pleut sur la ville.*

At that time I lived with and for the rain. I tried to imagine how everything I saw would look in the rain—and on the screen. It was part game, part obsession, part action. I had decided upon the several places in the city I wanted to film and I organized a system of rain watchers, friends who would telephone me from certain sections of town when the rain effects I wanted appeared. I never moved without my camera—it was with me in the office, laboratory, street, train. I lived with it and when I slept it was on my bedside table so that if it was raining when I woke I could film the studio window over my bed. Some of the best shots of raindrops along the slanted studio windows were

actually taken from my bed when I woke up. All the new problems in this film sharpened my observation and also forced me to relax the rigid and over-analytical method of filming that I had used in *The Bridge*.

With the swiftly shifting rhythm and light of the rain, sometimes changing within a few seconds, my filming had to be defter and more spontaneous. For example, on the big central square of Amsterdam I saw three little girls under a cape and the skipping movements of their legs had the rhythm of raindrops. There had been a time when I thought that such good things could be shot tomorrow as well as today; but you soon learn that this is never true. I filmed those girls without a second's hesitation. They would probably never again walk at that hour on the square, or when they did it wouldn't be raining, and if it was raining they wouldn't have a cape, or skip in just that way, or it would be too dark—or something. So you film it immediately. With these dozens of interrelated factors you get the feeling of shooting—now or never.

Even in that ABC exercise of *The Bridge* I had had a taste of the pure joy a film maker knows when playing around with movements and actions. I was filming a train engine waiting to cross the bridge, stopped by the red signal arm. I wanted to photograph the front of the waiting, puffing engine as if it were the impatient snout of a powerful animal. As I released the motor, smoke came out of the chimney and curled up in black and gray puffs into the air. Instinctively I raised my handcamera in a sort of syncopated swing with the lifting movement of the smoke. The result was pretty good, an interesting double movement within the frame that I might never have been able to calculate.

It took me about four months to get the footage I needed for *Rain*. To achieve the effect of the beginning of the shower as you now see it in the film I had to photograph at least ten beginnings and out of these ten make the one *film* beginning. The rain

itself was a moody actress who had to be humored and who refused anything but a natural make-up. I found that none of the new color-corrective film emulsions on the market were suitable for my rain problems. The old extra-rapid Agfa film with no color correction at all, and used without a filter, gave the best results. All lenses were used with a fully opened diaphragm because most of the work was done with a minimum of light.

It's remarkable how easy it is to forget the most basic elements of your subject and how important those basic elements are to your work. In *Rain* I had to remind myself constantly that rain is wet—so you must keep the screen dripping with wetness—make the audience feel damp and not just dampness. When they think they can't get any wetter, *double* the wetness, show the raindrops falling in the water of the canal—make it super-wet. I was so happy when I noticed at one of the first screenings of the finished film that the audience looked around for their raincoats and were surprised to find the weather dry and clear when they came out of the theatre.

To give the rain its fullest, richest quality I had to make sure that the sunlight that began and ended the film showed its typical differences. You have to catch the distinction between sunlight before rain and sunlight after rain; the distinction between the rich strong enveloping sunlight before the rain and the strange dreamy yellow light afterwards. I know that this sounds over-subtle but it is important and you have to be aware of it and remember to catch these subtleties with your camera.

In addition to careful photography, these nuances in light quality can be emphasized in movement. For example, I heightened the sharp quality of the sunlight that precedes the rain by keenly defined movements of light and shadow. The sharp dark shadow of a footbridge rips across the wide deck of a boat passing swiftly underneath. This movement is cut off by immediate contact with a

close-up of another boat moving in an opposite diagonal across the entire screen. As the rain begins I added to the changes in light, a change in these movements emphasizing the leisurely movement of barges, wet puffs of smoke and waving reflections in the water. When cutting these shots I was careful to avoid abrupt contrasts, letting them build up leisurely on the screen.

Another interesting thing I learned about the values of shots and movements was their relation to humor. In editing I guided the eyes of the audience to the right of the screen by a close shot of water gushing out of a drainpipe, following this immediately by a shot of a dripping wet dog running along. My intention was merely to pick up the movement and rhythm in the pipe shot with the shot of the dog and my simple movement continuity always got a laugh. If I had been a more skillful editor at that time I would have made a more conscious use of such an effect, but I was still learning. I was still too preoccupied with movement and rhythm to be sufficiently aware of the special film capacities for communicating the humorous movements around us.

However, *Rain* did teach me a great deal about film emotion—much more than the emotional story of the *Breakers*. In editing *The Bridge* I had discovered the sad effect achieved by the rhythmic repetition of slow heavy movements. In *Rain* I consciously used heavy dark drops dripping in big pear-shaped forms at long intervals across the glass of the studio window to produce the melancholy feeling of a rainy day. The opposite effect of happiness or gaiety in a spring shower could be produced by many bright small round drops pounding against many surfaces in a variety of shots.

To strengthen the continuity of *Rain* I used the repetition of a second visual motif—birds flying in the sunlight and then as the rain starts, a flock moving against the gray sky (continuing a rhythm indicated in the previous shot by leaves rustling in the wind). During the storm I showed one or

two birds flying restlessly about. After the rain has stopped there is a shot of some birds sitting quietly on the wet railing of a bridge.

I shot the whole film with my old Kinamo and an American De Vry handcamera. My assistant was a young Chinese sailor, Chang Fai, whom I had met as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant on the Zeedyk. Chang Fai had jumped a large Indies liner in order to stay in Holland and learn a profession before going back to Asia. His main job as my assistant was to hold an umbrella over my camera.

At that time I was living alone in the large attic of an old Amsterdam house opposite the stock exchange. Anyone who could bring some order to my Bohemian home life was welcome. Chang Fai did not speak a word of Dutch, but with a system of gestures we made the following deal: he would keep house for me and cook and I would teach him photography. He learned a great deal more than holding umbrellas over a moving camera. After a while he was able to buy his own camera and as a parting gift at the end of our deal I gave him all the formulae for fine grain development. I doubt if *Rain* could have been made without Chang's carefully held umbrella and his wonderful black soups

that cured the flu—a constant by-product of this film.

Made almost entirely as a cameraman's film, *Rain* proved to be successful with audiences. It followed the same distribution channels *The Bridge* had experienced, and was shown in *avant garde* movie theatres throughout Europe and in many ciné clubs. One thing that spectators always commented on was the film's identity with the simple things of daily life—revealing the beauty in these things. It was, I think, a new field for the close-up which until then had been used only for passionate or dramatic emphasis. These close-ups of every day objects made *Rain* an important step in my development.

The most serious criticism against the film was its lack of "content." In a certain sense this was an exact criticism. I failed to emphasize sufficiently human beings' reactions to rain in a big city. Everything was subordinated to the esthetic approach. In a way I am glad that I laid a foundation of technical and creative perfection before working on other more important elements. I have since seen too many films so exclusively dependent on content that the available means for film making have been neglected with injury to the content itself.