MARTIN ŠRAJER / 11. 4. 2023

The World Union of Documentary and its Czechoslovak traces

"A lively discussion about the social role and aesthetic form of documentary films received a new impulse when renowned documentarists from fourteen countries gathered in July at the first WUD [World Union of Documentary] Congress in Mariánské Lázně."[1] This innocuous statement from a monograph on the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens aroused my curiosity. The congress in question, scheduled for Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1948 and seemingly an event of global significance (not just because of its title), was unknown to me. So I decided to look up more information.

The aforementioned book on Ivens also says that the congress was organised mainly thanks to Elmar Klos. Due to Klos's influential position in the nationalised film industry and the Krátký film studio, which specialised in documentaries, that came as no surprise. He had also helped create the Mariánské Lázně Film Festival, which hosted the congress during its third edition. In addition to Klos, Czechoslovakia was represented by his future collaborator Ján Kadár and film journalist, screenwriter and pedagogue Alan František Šulc.

Last but not least, the Ivens monograph informs us that the goal of the three-day deliberations was to provide a definition of documentary film and make sure that documentarists wouldn't succumb to commercial and political influence, as often happened before and during the war. The resulting manifesto, first published in newspapers and magazines, and later in the book by British documentary film pioneer Paul Rotha *Documentary Film* (1952), reads as follows:

"Documentary film means all methods of capturing any aspect of reality on film, either by means of an authentic film shoot or a believable legitimate reconstruction, appealing not only to reason but also to emotion with the goal of awakening a desire for expanding human knowledge and consciously showing problems and their solutions in the fields of economy, cultural and interpersonal relationships. "[2]

The conference, held three years after the war in one of West-Bohemian spa towns, thus essentially answered the question of what constitutes, or rather what should constitute, documentary film. It wasn't the first definition of its kind – consider the oft quoted statement by John Grierson about the "creative interpretation of reality" – but it was probably the first result of a collective international dialogue rather than an individual opinion.

But who exactly helped form the definition? Who represented those fourteen countries? Determining that rather crucial information wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. Most publications on film history, or more specifically on documentary film history (for instance, *The Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia of the Documentary Film*), or even more specifically on Czechoslovak documentary film, ignore this event (in *Cesty k pravdě a lži* by Antonín Navrátil, there's only a brief reference in brackets).

According to free online sources, the WUD was founded in June 1947 in Brussels. Serving as an inspiration was the International Association of Friends of Documentary Film, founded one year earlier by French filmmaker Georges Franju and archivist Henri Langlois, the co-founder of Cinémathèque française. One of the main initiators of the Union was the globe-trotting filmmaker Joris Ivens, who had long tried to formulate a common goal for post-war documentary film and facilitate the exchange of films and knowledge between countries.

Instead of reading voluminous books on film history, I narrowed my focus to the remarkable life of Ivens. In the biography *Living Dangerously*, his biographer Hans Schoots merely repeats what we already know: in the summer of 1948, filmmakers from many countries founded the WUD in Mariánské Lázně. But according to the Dutch writer, there were only twelve countries represented, instead of fourteen. I will get back to that.

Schoots also adds that Ivens always supported documentarist associations. For instance in 1939 in New York, he became Chairman of the Association of Documentary Film Producers, which, however, ceased to exist during the war.[3]

As Schoots points out, the Union was also short-lived. Due to conflicts related to the Cold War, it was dissolved in 1950, after three years of existence. While we know when it was formed, when it was dissolved and what was its aim, the course of the founding meeting and the correct number of participating countries remains shrouded in mystery. I deduced that a meeting of such significance couldn't be ignored by the period press. I therefore turned my focus from foreign sources to digitalised Czechoslovak periodicals. They actually proved to be the most rewarding and, due to a relatively small delay in reporting, accurate source of the desired information.

"On the basis of the resolution made in Brussels, Mariánské Lázně hosted the founding meeting of the Congress on 17July,"[4] *Filmové noviny* informed its readers in July 1948. "The meeting was opened by Joris Ivens and, representing the Minister of Information, Section Head V. Nezval delivered a speech in which he emphasised the importance of documentary film for the state," continues the article.[5]

Basil Wright of Great Britain was appointed Chairman, Elmar Klos Vice-Chairman, Polish film historian Jerzy Toeplitz General Secretary, the article reads. The Chairman of the Honorary Court which was supposed to oversee observing the rules was Jean Painlevé and the seat of the Union was placed in Warsaw. Among those who also attended the congress were John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Béla Balázs, Michail Room, Georges Sadoul and Henri Storck.

Filmové noviny later published a story from the festival. It was accompanied by a photograph with a title suggesting that the congress was, in fact, attended by eleven countries. The situation was eventually cleared up thanks to a book on Czechoslovak festivals by the Czechoslovak Film Institute. In the book, I finally find out what countries participated: Belgium, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, France, Netherlands, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Switzerland and Great Britain plus observers from Australia, Romania, the USSR and the USA.[6] So the number fourteen was correct.

The most valuable information was in the thirteenth issue of periodical *Filmové zpravodajství* from 1948 and its report with a title that says it all: "Results of the

Documentarist Congress." It says that the debate resulted in defining three categories of documentary film: social; cultural and educational; scientific and experimental. Documentarists also agreed that each country should establish a national organisation uniting documentary filmmakers.

The article indicated that their activities were fuelled by a belief that documentary film can contribute to creating a better world of peace and prosperity, provided that it would be elevated above entertainment and propaganda, include engagement, and be based on international cooperation.

The Union, which was inseparably linked to Czechoslovakia, was further supposed to support study and work exchanges of documentarists between countries, oversee collaboration with organisations of educational and scientific films, film institutes and archives, and publish national and international catalogues of documentary films. [7]

How many of these ambitious goals the organisation managed to achieve during its short life and what was its real contribution to the development of documentary cinema is a question for other researchers.

Notes:

[1] André Stufkens, *Joris Ivens. Filmař světa*. (*Cinema Without Borders, The Films of Joris Ivens)* Prague: Academy of Performing Arts 2016, p. 480.

[2] ibid.

[3] Hans Schoots, *Living Dangerously. A Biography of Joris Ivens*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2000, p. 221.

[4] Čechoslovák předsedou. *Filmové noviny* 2, 1948, no. 30 (23rd July), p. 1.

[5] ibid.

[6] *Dvacet Mezinárodních filmových festivalů v Československu*. Prague: Czechoslovak Film Institute 1976, p. 409.

[7] Výsledky kongresu dokumentaristů. *Filmové zpravodajství* 4, 1948, no. 13, p. 2.