

"We are living a revival of fascism."

Filmmaker Peter Davis Revisits *The Spanish Earth*

By Sebastiaan Faber

Among the best-known documentaries to come out of the Spanish Civil War is *The Spanish Earth* (1937), which the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens produced together with Ernest Hemingway, Helen van Dongen and John Dos Passos, with John Ferno as cinematographer. Long considered an icon of the political documentary, the film takes a clear pro-Republican point of view, underscored through a simple narrative structure: The Spanish people throw off the yoke of the ruling class to modernize agriculture—specifically, through an irrigation project—and, in 1936, take up arms to defend their newly-earned emancipation against the Nazi- and Fascist-supported Nationalists who are bent on turning back the clock. The film moves between the battle front in the Spanish capital and Fuentidueña del Tajo, a rural town strategically located near the road from Madrid to Valencia.

In 2017, the veteran Canadian filmmaker Peter Davis premiered *Digging the Spanish Earth*, a documentary that is both a tribute and an on-the-ground investigation of the circumstances under which Ivens made his film. Davis's fascination with *The Spanish Earth* dates back decades. In fact, he began shooting in the 1980s. (Among the film's most valuable scenes are interviews from that decade with Ivens, Van Dongen, and the American journalist George Selden.) As Davis and his crew—which include the Hemingway scholar Alex Vernon and Almudena Cros, the president of the Association of Friends of the International Brigades—visit Fuentidueña del Tajo, they uncover unknown details that help resolve some of the unanswered questions that have long fascinated scholars. In an article for the *Hemingway Review* they suggest, for instance, that the irrigation project featured in the film may have been partly set up for the story's sake. Before going into distribution in the U.S., Ivens's film was screened at the Roosevelt White House in July 1937. Davis's film includes rare footage of this moment.

Last September, I spoke with Davis, who was born and raised in England and who has written, produced, and directed more than 70 documentaries on topics ranging from CIA spies and World War II to South Africa and the Jewish experience in the Catskills.

*In your film, you call The Spanish Earth a masterpiece. What makes it so?*

Perhaps the contrapuntal structure—town and country—in the war context; perhaps the avoidance of expression of hatred for the opposing side, or even of Fascism per se. Looked at now, of course, it lacks the personal. Nowadays, stories are told through a handful of personalities, or even just one, who drive the narrative. The old style was largely dictated by the equipment, which stamped a certain "distance" on the subject and demanded intervention of an explanatory narration.

*What, if anything, can young documentary filmmakers today learn from studying Ivens's film?*

I have full admiration for the present generation of documentary filmmakers. Their

work is often sublime. But I have a qualified admiration for the generation that includes my grandchildren, in that there is a general lack of interest in history. They live in the eternal present, and exciting future, and hold almost total disregard for the past. I don't know how to counteract this dangerous tendency, which makes films like mine seemingly redundant.

*Do you think documentary film as a genre can help counteract this tendency? Or does this new generation need different narrative format or production values to draw them in?*

I feel very strongly that I belong to a past generation. Drawing on an analogy that has been often mentioned, the change in human communication that occurred with the introduction of printing altered the mode of human thinking and consequently the course of history, and the digital age has I believe a far greater impact. I am a babe in the woods in this new era in which my grandchildren roam free. I think that the diligent teaching of history, always drawing lessons for the present, is essential; but the mode, the medium, to deploy is beyond my ken. Personally, I feel I am redundant, but I am doomed to work in the way I have done for the past 50-plus years. The present generation has the tools and the intelligence—whether they will be used for the perpetuation of the human race through teaching the lessons of history, I don't know.

*Your film was three or four decades in the making.*

When I undertook my documentary, the concept was originally to cover reportage of the Spanish Civil War *in toto*. That is, it was to include the reporting of both sides, and in general to deal with how war is reported, intending to reflect on the reporting of the Vietnam War. This concept was whittled down drastically when I started with *The Spanish Earth*, which in itself offered much of the story I wanted to tell. I of course was not working on *Digging* since I started in 1981. I never raised any money for my project at that time, and so put it on hold. Now, at this last stage of my life, I am trying to complete unfinished projects.

*Waugh, in his review in Cinéaste, doesn't like that your voice-over mentions the fact that Ivens "staged" some scenes. For Waugh, to call it staging is anachronistic.*

He is right that what we now call staging was rather the rule in that era, due mainly to the problem of the kind of camera used. Professional 35mm cameras would pretty much demand tripod-use, which means that you had to set up, which meant that you had to direct the action. The war sequences differ in this regard since there was action going on most of the time and impossible to direct. Since the introduction of 16mm hand-held cameras for professional use—especially for television—it has been possible to capture live action, all the more so with the arrival of video.

*How does your own view and practice of documentary filmmaking relate to Ivens's?*

I pretty much go along with Ivens's practice, which is close to my own. The subject will dictate my approach. In at least one of my documentaries—in an anti-Vietnam War film—I have used still photos to illustrate something that the photos did not in

fact relate to. To that extent, I am a "propagandist", although I don't think I would conceal a valid opposing view.

All in all, apart from what I take to be a fascinating subject—I am almost alone in this, it appears, judging by the lack of interest in Holland or anywhere else for my film—I am also conscious of the lost lessons of history. We live in what looks like a revival of Fascism. I hope that the viewer can see that.