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High-tech Avant-garde: PHILIPS RADIO

Karel Dibbets

PHILIPS RADIO, made in 1931, tries to combine two seemingly incompatible worlds: the film avant-garde of the 1920s and sound. The film takes a crucial place in Joris Ivens’s filmography as well as in film history for this reason. The avant-garde at that time was extremely dubious about the new sound engineering. Ivens and his composer, Lou Lichtveld, wanted to break with the fixation on the art of the silent film without giving up the ideals associated with it. They began an experiment in moving pictures and sounds when Philips Radio Company commissioned Ivens to make a film. This article will first of all deal with the style and structure of PHILIPS RADIO and then with the origin and reception of the film. Emphasis is put on the dimension of sound and in particular on the sound effects to which the makers paid so much attention.

PHILIPS RADIO is an industrial film about the production of radios at the Philips Company in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. The film consists of three parts, each of which is split up into two sections. In this way, six ‘chapters’ have been made, with an introduction and an epilogue. The first two chapters show the production of radio tubes: first, the receiver lamps, then the transmitter lamps. The third, short chapter is a visualization of radio communication. The fourth part shows the work at the office and in the laboratory. The final two chapters deal with the assemblage of radios and loudspeakers respectively. Intertitles inform the viewers which part of the production process is going to be shown. The complete film is thirty-six minutes long, the chapter about the production of receiver lamps is the longest (twelve minutes), and the one about radio communication the shortest (thirty-five seconds).

In the hands of Joris Ivens, photography and editing were tools that produce a remarkable style. They were not, however, intended to gratify the connoisseur. His visual style had been geared to the most prominent function of the film: public relations. The film had to mould and promote the Philips image. Philips wanted the ‘internationalization of name and product’, Ivens said during filming. ‘The public must be fascinated by what they see, they must be impressed by the company, so that they get the impression: The product of a company organized like this must be good.’ Ivens explicitly used the term ‘montage of concepts’ in this context; ‘the intention is
Publicity poster made by Anneke van der Feer, 1931.
to work with notions such as: order, precision, scientific preparation, product control, etc. [...] In his subconscious the viewer must remember these notions together with the producer’s name, so that when three days later the radio is mentioned, he specifically remembers these basic notions and that particular name brand.

This power to surprise and convince through visual means became highly developed in film and photography during the twenties. The New Photography at that time applied itself to showing something ordinary in an extraordinary way. In the Netherlands, the typographer Piet Zwart has become the best-known exponent of this movement. At the same time, the editing by Russian filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Vertov changed into an instrument for ideological propaganda: film should not portray reality, but reconstruct it by ‘intellectual montage’, according to Eisenstein. Both schools meet in Ivens’s work.

The New Photography and the ‘montage of concepts’ have both been used in PHILIPS RADIO to give shape to Philips as a ‘high-tech’ company. This term did not exist at the time, but was unmistakably what Philips had in mind. ‘High-tech’ means notions such as advanced technology, innovation, scientific progress, automation, mass production, internationalization, etc. That was the world preferred by Philips, and PHILIPS RADIO is what radiates these notions. For this reason, the film was called ‘Symphonie Industrielle’ in France.

Philips also knew how to make combinations of concepts. By choosing Ivens for this assignment (and Hans Richter for another film) a connection was suggested between Philips and the avant-garde – a surplus value that would have fitted public relations policy. Although Joris Ivens was known as a talented filmmaker with modernist ideas at the time, his oeuvre was still small. Apart from some short experimental films such as THE BRIDGE (1928) and RAIN (1929, in co-operation with Mannus Franken) he had been assigned to make a long film, WE ARE BUILDING (1929). The avant-garde film movement had enthusiastically received these films both at home and abroad and was extremely keen on high-tech; the filmmakers and photographers of the New Objectivity were particularly inspired by it. Philips was probably trying to join this development. The question, however, is whether the image of Philips as a high-tech company was favourable to Philips itself. The answer to this question was to have a surprise in store at the first performance.

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The sound track of PHILIPS RADIO is just as remarkable as the picture. Its four dimensions – music, sound effects, spoken word, and silence – will be
discussed briefly. It is important to point out that sound was added to the film after completing the editing of the images. Originally *PHILIPS RADIO* was to be a silent film. Halfway through production it was decided to make it a sound film. This method put a stamp on the final result.

First, the music’ was composed by Lou Lichtveld. The compositions were written for a small orchestra consisting of, in order of prominence: piano, violin, cello, and clarinet also trumpet, saxophone, and a little drum. These heterogeneous instruments produced a transparent sound. The music reveals the influences of modern composers such as Honegger, Milhaud and Poulenc. It has a strictly fragmentary character: not only do other sounds interrupt the music regularly, the music also interrupts itself repeatedly, especially during the intertitles. Moreover, the melodies are rarely allowed to finish. The result is that expectations are raised, but seldom realized. The music remains serene and clinical, and never becomes romantic. This clear, sober character fits the subject of the film: the cool realism of a high-tech company.

The music has a supporting role in *PHILIPS RADIO*. The composition and orchestration are such that the attention remains on the images undistracted by the music. ‘The influence of the music on the action of the film is practically nothing. [...] In this film Ivens’s camera plays the role of prima donna in an Italian opera. The orchestra is not allowed to fulfill an essential task anywhere.’78 The modern combinations of sounds may sometimes attract attention, yet it is the camera that comes first, and the music that follows. The nuances exist in the music. First, it nestles in the pictures, then it moves away in a contrapuntal direction in order to be absorbed by the image all the more. ‘The delicate, delicate sheen of thin glass tubes dissolves into the pearly discount arpeggios of a piano – the rapid, short jerks of a card puncher are supported by cello pizzicati.’9 Only once does the music get a chance to contribute on its own behalf, and that happens at the end.

The end of the film is a true finale, an audio-visual coda. For once, the music appears as an independent entity and it overwhelms the pictures. In the previous sections the film revealed how a radio is assembled. By the end of the film the radio is finished and now it must show that it also produces sound. This takes place in a ‘loudspeaker ballet’: big round loudspeakers revolve around in the image to the rhythm of the music – a strettino – ringing from their cones. Here the images dance to the music. This example of ‘absolute filming’ concludes *PHILIPS RADIO*.

Sound effects have been modestly applied in the film. They are completely absent in several scenes. For that reason, they are all the more noticeable when they are used. Then they are all too clearly present, especially when the music is silent: little moving carts rattle and squeak, a machine
stamps and hisses, a generator buzzes, a shop floor is full of sounds of grinding, while glass blowers breathe heavily. The sounds create a suggestive image that complements the image, even if they are sometimes unsynchronized.

Yet the sound effects are not only present to illustrate the image, they are also present to be listened to. The film presents an intense fascination with everyday sounds which are just as important as the music. This use of everyday sounds creates a terra incognita or tabula rasa phenomenon: sound on film is being discovered, tested, and listened to for the first time. Just as with the New Photography, PHILIPS RADIO aims to make the most ordinary noises sound striking. They sound clear, articulate, and nearby; their timbre and rhythm beg for attention. In PHILIPS RADIO the sounds of the factory have been selected and arranged to give a characteristic tone. In this sense, the sound effects track contributes to the ‘symphonie industrielle’.

Words are almost totally absent from PHILIPS RADIO. The film does not open with the usual titles and credits. Instead a voice says: ‘And now the Philips film.’ For the rest of the film the spoken word is as rare as words in a cemetary. In the lift, someone raises two fingers and says clearly, ‘two’. That is the only moment where a word is synchronized with the sound and the image. In two other scenes a voice is audible, but the words only illustrate the action. For example letters are signed in various languages, while a voice drones: ‘Very truly yours. Agréez messieurs. Hoogachtend. Hochachtungsvoll.’ Words like that do not need to be translated for an international audience. Remarkably the voices are always accompanied by music; this combination of words and music had only seldom occurred before 1931. Lichtveld treated both types of sound as equal elements in his composition.

The sparse use of spoken word contrasts sharply with the use of written words in the intertitles. The voices are part of the space before the camera while the titles are not; the intertitles seem to come from an external source and interrupt the action, a clear inheritance from silent films. Had the film been made a few years later, they would probably have been replaced by a voice-over.

Silence also had to be re-invented. The rare outdoor shots of the factory site are mostly shown without sound, as if they were filmed from inside through a glass window. Violent sound effects and music, alternated by sudden moments of silence, accompany the tests in the laboratory. Silence is to be synchronized and diegetic again and again – that is, the silence is part of the action shown. PHILIPS RADIO uses silence as a building block for the construction of the acoustic image, just as it uses the voices and sounds.
The film presupposes a great curiosity on the part of the spectator and a
love of sound that is as passionate as Lou Lichtveld’s. Lichtveld has treated
music, voice, sound effects, and silence as completely equal elements. This
does not make for easy listening. The soundtrack of the film is fragmentary
and complex; the music has a heterogeneous character and the various
sounds often seem to be autonomous. The visual argument of PHILIPS RA-
DIO does not reveal a solid structure either. The loose structure of the sound-
track has a special background, however. The film is an exploratory voyage
in the world of sound. The factory sounds are performed and tested one by
one. In this way, an ode to factory sounds is born. This fascination with
sound is graphically represented in the scene that shows the testing of the
loudspeakers. Here, listening is shown in images and made the subject of
the film. A technician, hand to ear, checks the loudspeakers. He turns the
volume knob, switches off the music, coughs the silence away, switches on
the music again, etc. This is the method of the film: it is an exercise in listen-
ing.

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How did the soundtrack of Philips Radio come into being? Originally PHILIPS
RADIO was to be a silent film, so it was decided at a rather late stage, after
most of the film had already been shot, to add sound. Two different con-
tracts were drawn up, one for the image track and one for the soundtrack.
The first contract was signed on 1 September 1930, when Ivens started
shooting the film. For the sound a new contract was drawn up in February
of 1931, but was not signed until May.

At first, Ivens had second thoughts about using sound, as so many of his
colleagues had at the time. ‘I am not an absolute supporter of the sound
film,’ he confessed, ‘but with this radio film sound is laid on thick.’ Under
no circumstances did he want to make a ‘spoken film’. He did realize the
value of sound montage. In December of 1930, Ivens began thinking of the
possibility of sound for the first time. While filming in the Philips
glassworks, he draws a reporter’s attention to the wealth of sound in this
space: ‘Beautiful material for a sound film. Inhuman symphonies of tinkling
glass combined in all kinds of strange, chime-like chords. Low, dull, explo-
sive sounds like faraway timpanic beats, and in between, the voice of a
warehouse manager, who bellows through the loudspeaker.’ These
sounds were later heard in PHILIPS RADIO as well.

However, Ivens had had no experience with a sound film. He was as-
sisted by the younger Lou Lichtveld, composer and ‘musical advisor’ of the
Film League, more well known by his pseudonym, Albert Helman.
Lichtveld did not have any experience with the production of sound films
either, but at least he had thought about it. He was one of few – if not the only one – in the Netherlands who had a definite interest in the relation between pictures and sound. Lichtveld travelled to Berlin in January of 1931 on Ivens’s advice. There, he visited not only the new sound film studios, but he also spoke with artists such as Oskar Fischinger, a filmmaker who made abstract films with music. Lichtveld stayed with his brother-in-law, Karel Mengelberg, a composer and conductor, who had just been appointed ‘Tonmeister’ at German radio and who was equally fascinated by the world of everyday sounds.

While Lou Lichtveld was familiarizing himself with Berlin, Joris Ivens travelled to Paris to study sound engineering in the French Tobis studios. Ivens had a long talk with René Clair, at that time the most important director at Tobis. René Clair enjoyed great respect among critical film circles. In 1930 he made his first sound film, sous LES TOITS DE PARIS, and was now working on the next, LE MILLION (1931). ‘We discussed his new film and mine at great length,’ Ivens told after his return, ‘and it did me a lot of good.’

The sound of PHILIPS RADIO was recorded in the French studios of Films Sonores Tobis in Epinay, where René Clair was also working, from 18 to 22 May 1931. No recordings were made on location at Philips in the Netherlands. ‘The big trouble was recording factory sounds,’ Lichtveld wrote. ‘Originally we thought we should record them in the factory at the same time as the film, but it was impossible to isolate the sounds we needed. We had been given every facility by Philips, but we were not allowed to interrupt anything to get the sound of one particular machine.’ Consequently, the factory sounds had to be imitated in the studio afterwards.

Dutch journalists arrived in Epinay and every large newspaper and many weeklies sent reporters to France to report on this story as if an event of national importance were at stake. This pre-publicity, satisfying to both client and filmmaker, also had its drawbacks: all attention was exclusively focused on the sound aspect of the film. This focus of the soundtrack did not at all match its subordinate function in the film. In this way, the impression arose that the creators were rather pretentious. It would be hard to compete with the overblown expectations later. The colourful reports in the press also contained a wealth of information about the post-synchronization process of PHILIPS RADIO.

The sound studio had been outfitted like a small film room. The walls were covered with heavy acoustic curtains. The orchestra, which had taken its place in the room, was conducted by Armand Bernard, a Frenchman who had written the music for René Clair’s LE MILLION. A motley collection of tools lay ready to reconstruct the factory sounds, objects not usually found
in a studio, such as a grinding stone, an oxygen cylinder, a saw, a windlass, roller skates and chains. Gramophone records were also made available containing the sounds of, for instance, a noisy shop floor. For the human voice, Eddie Startz who was well known for his command of languages and imitations was kept ready. Anyone familiar with the technique of post-synchronization as it was generally performed in the thirties and later, will recognize parallels with the way people worked on PHILIPS RADIO.

The German ‘Tonmeister’ Kretsch was in charge of technology. The French sound mixer Leblond, who followed the projection of the film through a large window, assisted him. ‘In every studio […] the central point is the cubicle of the mixer who controls the army of microphones spread out in the room and who checks the sounds the loudspeakers emit during the patient rehearsals […]’. The mixer could only adjust the sound of the various microphones, for at that time, technology had not progressed to the point where different soundtracks made earlier could be mixed down to one sound. All sounds – music, voices, effects – had to be recorded at the same time and on one optical soundtrack.

Every recording was preceded by the necessary preparations. The film had been cut into parts of a few minutes and every part had to be recorded individually. First it was decided how the factory noises had to sound. Then the orchestra went through the music once more without watching the film, then with the film. The mixer, in the meantime, could adjust the various microphones from his cubicle. Finally, the recording took place. When the conductor, the ‘noisemaker’ or the speaker had not paid enough attention to the synchronization, the recording had to be started over again. The final result was only heard on the following day, after the film with the optical soundtrack had been developed in a laboratory. If the result was disappointing, they had to decide whether to do the recording over again:

Most of the time and effort was required for the combined recordings, those in which the factory noises and the music had to sound simultaneous and complementary. The conductor looks somewhat nervous with all those hissing and stamping disturbers of the peace behind him, and he gazes a little reproachfully at the composer who approves of his music being disturbed by such a cacophony of noises. But the director smiles resignedly. The effect is better than expected, as the mixer knows how to balance the two types of accompaniment excellently.

Lou Lichtveld paid a lot of attention to the reconstruction of the factory noises. At Philips, he had heard the strangest noises, and it became an enormous task to recreate those impressions and memories in a studio. ‘We had been searching for the sound of a particular machine for a long time until one of the labourers suddenly found it by moving a piece of iron across a co-
Leo Jordaan devoted a report to this obsessive search for the right sound in *De Groene Amsterdammer* of 30 May 1931:

‘Woo... woo... woo... woo... – Psssst! Luah... Luah... Luah...! – Tjonk-bang... tjonk-bang... tjonk-bang...! – Fffft-tsching!’ ‘Aber nein – hören Sie doch: es ist nicht fu-u-u-u-t! Aber vielmehr: fuah – fuah – fuah! ’C’est-ça, je comprends, mais c’est impossible de producer... fu-u-u-u-t! Ça va – mais: fuah – fuah – fuah... pas possible!’ ‘Maar meneer Ivens, als we het eens zó probeerden...’ [...] The light is switched off and on the screen is the image of a labourer, apparently a glassblower, vibrating strangely and unreal. In front of the equipment with which he labours on his brittle material is something like a Bunsen burner... the wide flame flickering slowly. And behold the question *brûlante* in a double sense. It is the sound we are looking for.

It is true that Lichtveld and Ivens went to a great deal of trouble to find the right sound, but they were not always after a realistic, anecdotal illustration of the image. Leo Jordaan describes this in the following scene that occurred when post-synchronizing the glassblowing:

Mr. Startz, will you stand near the microphone? Attention – we will project the glassblowing one more time. When the picture of the blower is shown you start to breathe heavily – slowly and with difficulty, as if you are doing a heavy job. But do not forget – we are not concerned with a naturalistic clarification... we only want a strengthening of the sensation: laborious work. You absolutely need not breathe completely in sync with the labourer on the screen.

Synchronization was, different from what the quote assumes, a necessity. ‘The word synchronous in those days was rife. For that is the greatest difficulty to be conquered: making sure that the various sounds coincide accurately with the places in the film where they are required.’ Lichtveld, who wrote these words, repeatedly had the orchestra begin over again when synchronization was not to his satisfaction. The orchestra appeared to have great difficulty with one particular scene: the loudspeaker ballet. Lichtveld had composed fugal music to accompany the swirling images:

But the short duration of the visual image did not make things easy for the musicians. It appeared that the image ended sooner than the music. ‘Quicker,’ they called after the first trial. So once again. ‘Still quicker,’ was the result. ‘Still too slow,’ and several more times like this, till they finally succeeded to synchronize everything by playing the fugue at breakneck speed and both filmmaker and composer were able to realize their aims."

Why those problems with the synchronization of the music? Post-synchronization is never easy, but here something else was going on as well. Joris Ivens had recorded PHILIPS RADIO as a silent film at a speed of eighteen to
Sound engineer Kretsch, Joris Ivens and sound mixer Leblond (right) working on the soundtrack for PHILIPS RADIO.

The sound studio in Epinay, France: Joris Ivens, Kretsch, Leblond and, kneeling Mark Kolthoff.
twenty frames per second. As a sound film, it had to be projected at a speed of twenty-four frames per second. This change of speed not only results in wooden movements, but also disturbs the editing rhythms. Most likely, Lichtveld wrote his compositions on the basis of the silent version. The tempo of the written music was consequently too slow to synchronize it with the sound version. This would explain why the orchestra had to play quicker and quicker, not only in the final scene, but in the other scenes as well. This discrepancy between recording and projection speed is characteristic of the hybrid nature of PHILIPS RADIO, a film on the border of two eras.

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On 28 September 1931 PHILIPS RADIO and Hans Richter’s EUROPA RADIO were screened in the Tuschinski Theatre in Amsterdam for the first time. The film got a rather bad reception in the press. The criticism was applied in a positive way, however. Judging by the many articles and large headlines – a large number of dailies and weeklies featured extensive reviews – the impression might be that the film received good reviews, but that is only a fantasy. The press was sympathetic towards Ivens and Lichtveld’s first film. Even in the critical reviews many positive things were said, but there were objections, nonetheless.

The positive reviews often referred to the imagery and the music, although many critics admitted that they were not competent enough in the field of music. They appreciated the spectacular images in the glassworks, the testing of the loudspeakers, and the final loudspeaker ballet. The objections were directed at the structure of the film in the first place. The film is not a single unit, the NRC wrote; it is ‘too long-winded, too fragmentary.’ Secondly, there were objections to the leading role of the machines. The film was ‘blind to the people behind the machines’, Het Volk concluded; it had become ‘an ode to the machine’, a ‘document inhumain’. Thirdly, the film was criticized for showing a lack of fantasy and playfulness. ‘Frolicking movements, an uncomplicated representation that handles and combines the motives with grace, this is what we miss very much,’ De Tijd wrote. This last perceived shortcoming was all the more striking, because the much lighter and more humorous short film by Hans Richter, EUROPA RADIO had preceded PHILIPS RADIO at the screening. But what did the press think of the soundtrack?

Only a few critics gave their opinion about the film’s sound. Most of them dismissed it with remarks like: ‘Lou Lichtveld’s sonorization is generally perfect. Only the natural sound effects that are, in our opinion, sometimes too arbitrarily used.’ The weeklies went into sounds aspects more extensively. Leo Jordaan praised the film profusely because it ‘took into ac-
Stills from PHILIPS RADIO.
count the basic principles of sound film: independence of images and sound.27 His colleague at De Haagsche Post wrote the exact opposite: ‘The music by the young Dutch composer is essentially simple accompaniment to a cinematographic movement. The camera comes first, the music follows.’28 Whereas Jordaan was jubilant about examples of musical sound imitation (the short jerks of a cardpuncher are supported by cello pizzicati’), the De Haagsche Post reviewer disapproved, calling them old-fashioned examples of ‘music-with-the-film’, put in a modern context. Lou Lichtveld would have agreed with this latter view: he repeatedly made it known that his music played a subordinate, accompanying function in the film.29 Modernization was not to be expected from him at this juncture.

The great obedience of the music was also criticized by Meyer Sluyser in the socialist newspaper, Het Volk, but for a different reason. Sluyser first pointed out that the film was an ode to the machine, and then continued:

Lou Lichtveld supported this tendency with his accompanying music. The furious tumult of the enormous machines has been worked into the accompaniment, but when the camera then wanders into the machine workshop, where the receivers are produced on the assembly line, the accompaniment becomes definitely romantic. Lichtveld did not see or hear anything of the hustle and bustle of the people, toiling against each other as the result of a cunning premium and group system. On a hook high, in the air, hangs the shining machine and the music sways in the same cadence as the machine. But the people below are absent, as they are absent in the whole film and only occasionally appear when it could not be avoided, as an incidental part of the space.30

In contrast, the communist newspaper, De Tribune, claimed to know why Ivens made the machines speak more than the people:

Well, they spoke depressingly enough for our tastes. [...] This film clearly shows that there can be no job satisfaction in the modern company. [...] Joris Ivens will make something quite different, of course, when he goes to the Soviet Union later, where he [...] will be able to see machines as the labourers’ comrades, who with their steel arms will help build a new society.

All reviewers did, however, agree that PHILIPS RADIO was an ode to the machine, a ‘symphony industrielle’. Looked at it in this way, Joris Ivens achieved what he wanted: to give shape to the image of Philips as a ‘hightech’ enterprise. Yet, it should be asked whether this high-tech image was favourable for Philips. Philips had its idea of its own image and that required that they not show any manual labour, preferring to focus on the machines. Reactions however, were the exact opposite of what Philips desired: too many machines, too few people. Every newspaper praised the fragment
with the glassblowers who performed heavy, physical labour. This, ironically, is the fragment that troubled Philips the most and was the portion of the film they wanted to cut out afterwards. In conclusion, Philips got from Ivens what they had asked for. The fact that the press and the audience reacted differently than expected was a miscalculation on Philips’s part. The company would learn its lesson: Philips turned to the production of puppet films and George Ivens was replaced by Georg Pal.

Philips Radio became the first industrial sound film. It is also the first sound film by a Dutch avant-garde filmmaker. The film avant-garde had been on the brink of disappearing in 1931, first, because the movement had exhausted itself, and second, because the new sound engineering was a serious obstacle to free development. Philips Radio borders on two worlds. The film may therefore be seen as a farewell to the avant-garde, the end of an era. Afterwards, there were some minor experiments in this direction, but Philips Radio is the turning point that also led to its end. Ivens and Lichtveld’s film even bears evidence of this.

Adding sound made Philips Radio into a hybrid, a kind of amphibious film belonging to both the silent era and the new sound era. This amphibious nature can still be associated with this film because the images were recorded at a speed of eighteen frames per second while the sound was recorded at twenty-four frames per second. The consequence is that the film can never be shown correctly: either the images move too fast, or the sound moves too slowly. Philips Radio shares this defect with other avant-garde films that were provided with subsequent soundtracks.

Lou Lichtveld saw Philips Radio as an experiment, and in that sense the film certainly served its purpose. ‘It was the necessary exploration of the whole dimension of sound in the documentary film,’ he thought:

The Philips Radio film [...] attempted to render the half-musical impressions of factory sounds in a complex audio world that moved from absolute music to the purely documentary noises of nature. In this film every intermediate stage can be found: such as the movement of the machine interpreted by the music, the noises of the machine dominating the musical background, the music itself is the documentary, and those scenes where the pure sound of the machine goes solo.

Philips Radio links up closely with Melodie der Welt, the documentary sound film that Walter Ruttmann made in 1929 and which was shown in Dutch cinemas in 1930. In it, Ruttmann experimented with the relation between image and sound. He edited the soundtrack of Melodie der Welt to a collage of music, voices, sounds, and moments of silence. ‘In this way Melodie der Welt became the first important sound documentary, the first
in which musical and unmusical sounds were composed into a single unit and in which image and sound are controlled by one and the same impulse,' Lou Lichtveld wrote.35 He was undoubtedly inspired by Ruttmann’s film. It is not accurate to portray Lichtveld as an epigone of Ruttmann: both artists were much more kindred spirits who shared an interest in the new art of sound of their time. Lichtveld tried to translate factory noises into a refined form of charivari, a ‘composition of common and uncommon sounds – a melody of the machines’ 36 Through his efforts the soundtrack of PHILIPS RADIO has become a resounding monument to the New Objectivity, a true partner to Ivens’s images.
High-tech Avant-garde: PHILIPS RADIO

1. During the production of PHILIPS RADIO Ivens surrounded himself with a choice of young assistants, who learned the trade from him: Mark Koltchof and John Fernhout contributed extensively to the camera work; Helene van Dongen was production assistant and edited the film; Lou Lichtveld was responsible for the sound. In the meantime, others such as Willem Bon and Jan Hin worked on various film assignments Ivens had been given. This was Studio Joris Ivens as he himself called the group. The French cameraman Jean Dréville came to Eindhoven for additional shots.

2. Apart from Ivens, Philips gave another avant-gardist an assignment: Hans Richter, a German. The two filmmakers had different tasks. Richter was to show the role radio played in the people’s lives, whereas Ivens was to make a portrait of Philips as a modern radio factory. The two films, PHILIPS RADIO and EUROPA RADIO, were simultaneously screened in Amsterdam on 28 September 1931.

3. Immediately after completing the editing, Ivens gave a summary of the film in a letter to his client, in which he also distinguished six parts and an introduction and an epilogue. Ivens to Philips/Numann, 10 June 1931 (Philips Company Archives PCA 185.1). I am grateful to Philips Company Archives (PCA) for allowing me full access to its holdings during my research.

4. Despite its short length, the communication section has its own place in the film. Not only is it a representation of the notion of communication that can be found in the exact centre of the film, but it is also the only fragment showing the purpose of a radio. Ivens considered this part a separate ‘chapter’ of the film (see note 3). It is possible to assume that its short length is the consequence of a cut, made before the first screening in September 1930. Philips wanted Ivens to restrict himself to what went on inside the factory. Philips had a good reason for this: Hans Richter was working on a film about the social role of radio communication, EUROPA RADIO. Philips (or Richter?) would not have allowed Ivens to enter Richter’s territory.

5. ‘Shooting at Philips’, in NRC, 7 February 1931.


7. The original score is kept at the Bifi archives in Paris. I am grateful to Hans Schoots for supplying this information.


Notes

10 Ivens had thought of this scene rather early. See ‘A Dutch radio sound film’ in NRC, 8 February 1931. Elsewhere in the film a loudspeaker is shown and the command booms: ‘Hello, hello, machine 2B, five hundred pieces,’ while a hand writes the figures on a notice board.

11 Agreement between Ivens and Philips Radio Ltd, 1 September 1930 (PCA). The contract had been negotiated for some months (correspondence in PCA 185.1). Ivens promised to complete an ‘institutional film’ of about 800 metres’ length, ‘which will give an image of the production of radios in the factories in Eindhoven and elsewhere in the Netherlands by the client.’ The contract price amounted to 9500 Dutch guilders. Philips guaranteed royalties of at least 2500 Dutch guilders. Travel and accommodation expenses were to be refunded by Philips, as were the cost of film titles and special effects.

12 Agreement between Ivens and Philips Radio Ltd, 2 May 1931 (PCA). Relevant correspondence can be found in PCA 185.1. It is an extension of the agreement of 1 September 1930. Philips ordered the ‘composition, editing and production of a soundtrack’. Synchronization would take place at the Tobis studio in Paris. The soundtrack was to be ready 22 June 1931. The contract price amounted to 23,000 Dutch guilders, excluding 1,500 Dutch guilders for expenses.

13 ‘A Dutch radio sound film?’, in NRC, 8 February 1931.

14 ‘For thirty metres of film’, in De Telegraaf, 25 December 1930. It is not impossible that Lou Lichtveld wrote this report.

15 Conversation with Dr. L.A.M. Lichtveld, Hilversum, 30 November 1988. After his visit to Berlin Lichtveld wrote the article ‘Fischinger musical films’, in De Groene Amsterdammer, 31 January 1931.

16 ‘A Dutch radio sound film?’, in NRC, 8 February 1931.


18 ‘The Philips radio film sonorized’, in NRC, 30 May 1931. Dr. Vermeulen of Philips was to describe the same procedure as follows: ‘Every microphone had its own amplifier in the central amplifying room, after which all were united in the mixing room, where 9 potentiometers and a general potentiometer for mixing and regulating have been installed’. Report of a journey to Paris, 26 May 1931 (PCA NL.563).


26 Ibid.
29 ‘In no way is my music independent. I only wanted to illustrate’, Lichtveld said to a reporter in Algemeen Handelsblad, 30 May 1931. A similar statement in ‘A film expedition to the Phohi’, in Algemeen Handelsblad, 28 February 1931.
30 Het Volk, 29 September 1931.
31 Letter from Philips to Capi/Ivens, 6 January 1932 (PCA 185.1). This scene is included in the film print of PHILIPS RADIO kept by the Netherlands Film Museum. This print is practically identical to the film that was first performed in 1931. This can be concluded from what is known about the length and the structure of PHILIPS RADIO in 1931, and furthermore on the basis of the correspondence between Ivens and Philips (PCA 185.1). Ivens’s letter to Philips/Numann dated 10 June 1931, in which Ivens describes the length and the structure of the film shortly after completing the picture and sound editing is important. This data corresponds to the print kept in the Film Museum. Also the length, which was ‘1000 metres’ according to Ivens and 997 metres according to the Dutch censorship report of 24 September 1931, approaches that of the preserved print (980 metres). Only some intertitles were added with Ivens’s consent.
36 Lichtveld characterizes his own work in this way in an interview. ‘A film expedition to Phohi’, in Algemeen Handelsblad, 28 February 1931. This view shows some parallels with the bruitism of the Italian Futurist Russolo.

LA SEINE A RENCONTRÉ PARIS and the Documentary in France in the Fifties