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| Leyda, Jay (1910-1988) |
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| Jay Leyda's peripatetic life and protean career cut a unique, remarkable path. The long list of roles he mined include filmmaker, photographer, critic, archivist, art dealer, translator, librettist, and educator. He is best remembered, however, as a leading historian of early and Soviet and Chinese cinemas, interests he started to develop in the vibrant art circle he helped establish in New York City in the 1930s.  Born in Detroit, Michigan, Leyda was raised by his grandmother in Dayton, Ohio. His artistic training started early; after studying photography under Jane Reece, he moved to New York City in 1929 to work as Ralph Steiner's darkroom assistant. After a year of working for Steiner, Leyda left and supported himself by freelancing as a portrait photographer for various magazines, including *Vanity Fair* and *Arts Weekly*; in this capacity he met and photographed Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the person largely responsible for establishing its film library. Leyda also secured a position as sound and recording arranger at the Bronx Playhouse, where he was exposed to repeated showings of films by internationally acclaimed directors including Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. |
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After a year of working for Steiner, Leyda left and supported himself by freelancing as a portrait photographer for various magazines, including *Vanity Fair* and *Arts Weekly*; in this capacity he met and photographed Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the person largely responsible for establishing its film library. Leyda also secured a position as sound and recording arranger at the Bronx Playhouse, where he was exposed to repeated showings of films by internationally acclaimed directors including Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. While working at the Playhouse, he became familiar with the Bronx neighborhood where he met the Schultz family who had recently emigrated from the Soviet Union. Coincidentally, Mr. Schultz's wife was the sister of the woman who played the part of the mother with the baby carriage in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In 1931, Leyda purchased an Eyemo camera and made *A Bronx Morning* (1932). The ownership of the camera granted him active membership with the Workers' Film and Photo League for whom Leyda worked mainly as a newsreel cameraman. Around the same time, through his affiliation with the Julien Levy Gallery, Leyda met Walker Evans, Alfred Stieglitz, and other photographers and filmmakers. Levy and his friends formed the New York Film Society in 1933, and Leyda worked for both the Film Society and the Film Forum, established around the same time as the Society but with a leftist bent.  In late 1933, with only a month of instruction in Russian, Leyda left for Moscow to attend the Moscow State Film School where he was admitted to the camera department. It was here that he met his future wife, Si-lan Chen, through her sister Yolanda who was a fellow student. Leyda eventually transferred into the directing department after a successful screening of his film *A Bronx Morning* to Eisenstein and Vertov. From here on, Eisenstein became Leyda's mentor and his strongest influence; in turn, Leyda became Eisenstein's confidant and English-language ambassador. In the summer of 1934, Leyda briefly worked for Vertov and Joris Ivens. In January 1935, he joined Eisenstein's crew to work on *Bezhin Meadow* (1937) as still photographer and production historian. He also married Si-lan Chen who was a dancer and choreographer and the daughter of Eugene Chen who had been Sun Yat-sen's secretary.  In 1936 Leyda accepted Alfred Barr's offer for the position as assistant to Iris Barry in the newly established film department at MoMA. Leyda introduced Barry to Eisenstein, and they took with them Eisenstein's only reliable print of *Potemkin* when they left Soviet Union to continue to tour Europe and collect materials for MoMA. Back in New York, Leyda immediately began work on a history of Soviet film commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation. Eager to share with others what he learned from Eisenstein, Leyda joined Frontier Films, a leftist organization founded by veterans of the Workers' Film and Photo League, and moonlighted as editor and adviser under the pseudonym Eugene Hill. After editing *People of the Cumberland* (1937) and *China Strikes Back* (1937), Leyda reduced his participation to acting as consultant on other Frontier projects. In 1939, Leyda co-founded and co-edited the magazine *Films*, which folded after one year due to the financier's mismanagement. In August 1940, Leyda was forced to resign his position at MoMA because of his political affiliation, something that would plague him the following decades. Unemployed and faced with limited options, Leyda worked for ArtKino until it dissolved.  In 1942, he and his wife moved to Hollywood to consult for Warner Brothers on Russian subjects for *Mission to Moscow* (1943) and for MGM on *Song of Russia* (1944). Around this time Leyda began translating Eisenstein's essays at the director’s behest, to be later published as *The Film Sense* (1942) and *Film Form* (1949). When work in Hollywood became increasingly scarce due to blacklisting and mounting anti-communism, Leyda engaged in scholarly research on other interests he shared with Eisenstein: Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson. He secured several Guggenheim Fellowships to help him financially, and in 1950 Leyda and his wife left Hollywood for the East Coast and eventually relocated to London.  In 1958 Si-lan Chen was invited to teach choreography in Beijing and Leyda accompanied his wife. He gained access to the Chinese film archives, where he researched what turned out to be the first detailed book on Chinese films, *Dianying: Electric Shadows* (1972). He also began a memorandum on the uses and values of film archives that developed into a book on compilation documentaries, *Films Beget Films* (1964). From 1964 to 1969, Leyda worked at the Staatliches Filmarchiv in East Berlin, after which he took various teaching positions at Yale and York Universities. From 1973 to 1987, Leyda taught at New York University where he influenced and inspired a long list of future film historians and filmmakers. List of Works:Film and Publications in Chronological Order Leyda, J. (1932) *A Bronx Morning*. Film. 16mm silent b&w.  Eisenstein, S. (1942) *The Film Sense*. Ed. and trans. by J. Leyda. New York: Harcourt Brace.  Leyda, J. and S. Bertensson, eds. (1947) *The Musorgsky Reader: a Life of Modeste Petrovich Musorgsky in Letters and Documents*. New York: W.W. Norton.  Eisenstein, S. (1949) *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Ed. and trans. by J. Leyda. New York: Harcourt Brace.  Leyda, J., ed. (1949) *The Complete Stories of Herman Melville*. 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(Includes Leyda's 'The Published Writings (1922-1964) of Sergei Eisenstein, with notes on their English translations'.)  Nizhniĭ, V., I. Montagu, and J. Leyda (1969) *Lessons with Eisenstein*. New York: Hill and Hang.  Leyda, J. (1972) *Dianying: Electric Shadows, an Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*. Cambridge: MIT Press.  Eisenstein, S. (1974) *Eisenstein: Three Films*. Ed. by Leyda, trans. by Diana Matias. New York: Harper & Row. (Includes annotated scripts of *Battleship Potemkin*, *October*, and *Alexander Nevsky*).  Leyda, J. (1977) *Voices of Film Experience: 1894 to the Present*. New York: Macmillan.  Leyda, J. and Z. Voynow (1980) *Eisenstein at Work*. New York: Pantheon Books and the Museum of Modern Art. (Written with the help of the Eisenstein Committee in Moscow)  Eisenstein, S. and J. Leyda (1985) *A Premature Celebration of Eisenstein's Centenary*. Calcutta: Seagull Books.  Eisenstein, S. and J. Leyda (1986) *Eisenstein on Disney*. London: Methuen. |
| Further reading:  (Michelson)  (Radosh and Radosh)  (Sbardellati)  (Uricchio) |