

A Bronx Morning

By Scott Simmon

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“A Bronx Morning” is a portrait of a place and time. It is simultaneously a documentary, an avant-garde experiment, and an amateur film – although its compositional beauty and complex editing disguise that it is a 21-year-old’s first attempt at moviemaking.

Jay Leyda (1910-88) is remembered with deep affection by the film students and archivists whom he taught and befriended at the end of a remarkable career of astonishing breadth. He had arrived in New York City from Ohio in 1929 and at the time of this film was already an accomplished still photographer and published poet. He is best known in cinema studies for his groundbreaking histories of Russian/Soviet and Chinese film, “Kino” (1960) and “Dianying: Electric Shadows” (1972), published when both filmmaking traditions were scarcely known in the West. American literary scholars honor him for his pioneering documentation in “The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson” (1960) and “The Melville Log” (1951), one of several of his books that brought Herman Melville out of relative obscurity. Leyda’s musical interests led to an opera libretto for Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” and books on Mussorgsky and Rachmaninoff.

With funds from an art sale and photographic work for “Vanity Fair” and “Arts Weekly,” Leyda bought the camera and film for “A Bronx Morning,” which he described shortly after it was made as “simple and communicative, about a place that, in addition, has hitherto been untouched by a movie camera. It is neither an exotic nor a romantic place.” The film’s limited screenings were mainly in art and photography galleries (including Alfred Stieglitz’s An American Place), but Leyda also used it successfully in his application to Sergei Eisenstein’s directing courses at the Moscow State Film School. He subsequently crewed for Eisenstein on the suppressed “Bezhin



Signs of the Bronx in decline. Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.

Meadow” (1935-37). Back in the United States and after working as a curator in the Museum of Modern Art’s new film department, with the Frontier Films collective, and at Warner Bros. and MGM, Leyda became the conduit to the West for Eisenstein’s seminal theoretical work, translating and editing three volumes, beginning with “The Film Sense” in 1942.

“A Bronx Morning” applied European avant-garde styles to a subject closer to home. As Leyda put it with typical self-deprecation much later, “Thanks to my devotion to journals it had echoes of “Rien que les Heures” [Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926], “Berlin” [Walter Ruttmann, 1927], “L’Étoile de Mer” [Man Ray, 1927], “Ballet Mechanique” [Dudley Murphy and Fernand Léger, 1925] before I ever saw those films, “The Man with the Movie Camera” [Dziga Vertov, 1929] (the first Soviet film I saw in New York), and there’s even one shot that derives directly from the cover photograph on an issue of “La Revue du Cinema!” Never underestimate the influence on filmmakers of print and photo-engraving.” The opening of “A Bronx Morning” is clearly inspired by “Berlin,” with which it shares initial abstractions of parallel train tracks and power lines followed by a train-window introduction to an urban space.

Like “Skyscraper Symphony,” “A Bronx Morning” is a “city symphony,” but architectural abstractions are only part of Leyda’s portrait. The film soon naturalizes its abstractions into a vibrant vision of children’s

games and adult commerce on the summer streets of the Bronx, the New York borough northeast of Manhattan, where buildings loom less inhumanly than in “Skyscraper Symphony.” Although Leyda would later in the 1930s criticize his own film for its insufficient political commitment, it is distinguished by the sly wit of its social montage and an awareness of the economics of place. A raised awning doubles as a “wipe” transition to black on which the first intertitle reads “The Bronx does business ...” – followed by a LOST OUR LEASE sign, a FIRE SALE, BELOW COST sign, and further hints that the Bronx is struggling. By 1931, silent filmmaking was dead in Hollywood studios, and it was left to small-scale independent films to bring the form to the streets of Depression America.

About the Preservation

“A Bronx Morning” was preserved from a 35mm print donated by Jay Leyda to the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, when he was assistant to Iris Barry, MoMA’s first film curator.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Scott Simmon is Professor of English at UC Davis. His books include The Films of D.W. Griffith (1993) and The Invention of the Western Film (2003). Simmon's informative essays have accompanied the NFPF Treasures DVDs as well as the Foundation's free online release of Orson Welles' recently discovered and preserved film “Too Much Johnson.”