

**Review of *Eisenstein*  
by Yon Barna  
[Forward by Jay Leyda]  
(Indiana University Press, 1973), 287 pages**

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**Review of *Eisenstein***  
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This book is clearly written, neatly designed, copiously illustrated, well-indexed and often informative. It is also about as convincing in its principal arguments as Spiro Agnew's retirement speech. Why the disparity?

Writing about Eisenstein is no easy task, for how does one reconcile the reputation with the achievement? What does one say about a man

A.     who has an enormous reputation among non-filmmakers as a film *teacher*, even though he

1.     developed no filmmakers of significance among his students with the possible exception of the Vasiliev 'brothers' (in contrast, for example, to Griffith who, having no comparable reputation as a teacher, taught not only von Stroheim, Raoul Walsh, Allan Dwan, Tod Browning, Mack Sennett, and John Ford, but also – albeit indirectly – Pudovkin and Eisenstein himself), and

2.     designed a course of training for film directors in the GIK that, as his own training under Mayakovsky should have told him, was pedagogically absurd;

B.     who has an enormous reputation among non-filmmakers as a *filmmaker*, even though his most famous work, THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN, has had less influence upon filmmaking style than perhaps any equally famous film other than THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI or CITIZEN KANE;

C.     who has an enormous reputation among non-filmmakers as a film *theorist*, even though

1.     his massive writings have had but minor effect on the practice of film design (in contrast, for example, to the effects of the slim writings of Pudovkin that, upon immediate translation into the major languages of the West, have formed the basis for the practice of dramatic continuity cutting up to the present day), and

2. his celebrated analyses of the effects of his own films (in particular those of THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN and ALEXANDER NEVSKY) are of such low psychological accuracy that they enlighten only by happenstance;

and yet a man who

- D. after spending almost one-third of his prime creative life on three consecutive abortive projects, QUE VIVA MEXICO!, BEZHIN MEADOW, and FERGHANA CANAL (an experience that would have killed, creatively if not literally, a man of ordinary imagination), returned to produce a work of more than occasional brilliance, ALEXANDER NEVSKY, and an unfinished masterpiece of staggering innovative power, IVAN THE TERRIBLE.

I sympathize, therefore, with the problems that Barna faced in writing this volume and appreciate his decision to restrict the scope of his commentary.

Unlike other biographies, this one does not attempt to analyze Eisenstein's work as an artist – such investigation awaits another occasion – but only to investigate its emotional sources, the circumstances in which it was born, that special concurrence of sensory and social events that determines the conditions for the appearance of a work. (page 10)

I cannot, however, sympathize with Barna's other solutions, for whatever one chooses to say about Eisenstein, one must speak with factual care and logical precision to avoid wallowing in legend and wishful thinking. Yet Barna makes two choices that force him throughout the book to beg every significant question that one could ask about Eisenstein the artist, namely,

- I. he idolizes Eisenstein and his work; and
2. he insists upon arguing that Eisenstein was an improvisational rather than a preplanning artist – an argument whose verification would not only lie beyond the scope of his book (as the above quotation makes evident), but whose falsity is demonstrated by Barna's own discussion!

Barna's evaluations of Eisenstein's contributions range generally from the humorous through the harmless to overstatement so blatant as to endanger the reputation he seeks to enhance.

Comparing Griffith's use of the close-up to that of Eisenstein, he concludes that "Griffith told a story; Eisenstein composed a poem" (page 74).

He refers to "Eisenstein's incredibly thorough scientific analysis (of POTESKIN) in which he used both mathematical and physical formulae to explain the film's emotional content" (page 90).

He refers to the famous montage sequence of the stone lions in THE BATTLESHIP POTESKIN (that even John Howard Lawson has the grace to condemn) as "this classic piece of montage . . . (a) stroke of genius" (page 96).

He hails THE BATTLESHIP POTESKIN for its "crystal clarity", as having "greatness...beyond dispute", as being "the most perfect and concise example of film structure" (page 104) and as being "unparalleled for its elemental force by anything in the field of art, with the single exception of the Marseillaise" (quoting Jerzy Toeplitz with approval, page 113).

He says that Eisenstein, in THE GENERAL LINE, had "reached the ultimate point to which the silent film could be developed," and insists that "with this film, composition in depth...was *perfected*" [italics EWC] – fifteen years before the work of Gregg Toland.

He suggests that the collaboration between Eisenstein and Prokofiev on ALEXANDER NEVSKY "constitutes a notable phenomenon in art history: two artists of genius synchronizing their talents so perfectly that a single mind might have been at work" (page 213), wondering in astonishment how Eisenstein could ever have contemplated cutting 200 metres from the battle montage of the film (Jean Mitry says 600 metres) "universally hailed for its compositional perfection" (page 214).

From an author who obviously has had limited filmmaking experience, despite the claims of the book-jacket, and who is awestruck by mathematical and physical formulae whose proper functions he does not understand (and hence who would not recognize a 'thorough scientific analysis' if one bit him), the above exaggerations are understandable if not commendable. When Barna goes on, however, to take several cheap shots at Pudovkin and Dovzhenko, the distortions become as flagrant as the self-serving limitations of his method.

But whereas Pudovkin's attitude – his comments about Eisenstein after his death, for instance – smacks distinctly of jealousy, the same can hardly be said of Eisenstein. (page 115)

What comments? Barna gives none! (The only comments with which I am acquainted are Pudovkin's honest attempt to assess his own importance vis a vis the inflated reputation of Eisenstein.) And the malicious reference to Pudovkin by Eisenstein in the paragraph immediately preceding the above quotation hardly supports Barna's position.

Not long ago we had another talk. Today he (Pudovkin) agrees with my point of view. True, during the interval he took the opportunity to acquaint himself with the series of lectures I gave during that period at the State Cinema Institute. (page 115)

No less inaccurate is Barna's insinuation of the supposed "mockery" of Eisenstein by Dovzhenko at the All Union Conference of Cinematographic Workers in 1935, for, as is apparent from Jay Leyda's more extensive excerpts of the speech in *Kino* (Macmillan, New York, 1960, pages 318- 319), Dovzhenko was making (in Leyda's words) a "heart-felt speech" full of "pity and fear" – hardly a mockery of the man.

It is, however, in Barna's insistence that "all Eisenstein's work, was a spontaneous artistic creation, owing nothing to his precise, academic calculations" (page 109) that the systematic scholarly inadequacies of Barna's method appear. For Barna has an axe to grind: he wishes to dismiss the relevance of Eisenstein's preplanning and of his

. . . clear, cold, mathematical analyses – which many of his detractors invoked in alleging that he was merely a skilled engineer who constructed his films with a slide rule and precalculated abstract formulae. (page 91)

But the evidence belies the argument, Barna's 'special pleading' to the contrary notwithstanding.

We know of improvisational filmmakers, like Cassavetes, and of calculators, like Hitchcock, and, compared to Eisenstein, Hitchcock was a lazy man!

From the time of *STRIKE* (when, in Barna's words, Eisenstein "envisaged the film and worked out a detailed scheme for its direction before mastering the technical equipment at his disposal" (page 80)), through his lectures at the GIK ("His lectures gave the impression of being improvisations. In fact, however, they were the fruit of long preparatory work, carried out with the same thoroughness and attention to detail as he put into his filmmaking." (page 205)), to the making of *IVAN THE TERRIBLE* that was in preplanning for two years before shooting even began, Eisenstein researched and preplanned the design of everything he did, compiling as evidence mountains of historical notes, set designs, costume sketches, mise-en-scene plots, etc..

Barna even quotes Eisenstein (though only in a footnote) affirming that

According to my artistic principle, we did not depend on intuitive creativeness but on a rational construction of affective elements; each affect must be subjected previously to a thorough analysis and calculation; this is the most important thing. (page 109)

Yet, while admitting the incongruity of Eisenstein's frequent assertions with his argument, Barna insists, for example, that THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN's "perfect harmony of feeling" was created

. . . not through careful advance planning, but in the heat of the moment at the frantic montage stage. (page 109)

Barna even goes so far as to argue that eyewitness accounts of the Potemkin massacre must be erroneous, since Eisenstein had said that he invented the tarpaulin incident on the deck, and "there seems no reason for doubting Eisenstein's word" (page 98)!

The phrase "in the heat of the moment at the frantic montage stage" will strike any seasoned editor as hilarious, and the suggestion that eyewitness accounts provide no reason to doubt Eisenstein's word is simply incredible and would have been seen as such by any author more interested in discovering the truth than in perpetrating his assumptions about the creative process.

By the end of the book, even Barna is forced to feel the weight of the evidence that he disregards.

To what extent was ALEXANDER NEVSKY preplanned and to what extent a spontaneous creation? In describing his methods of preparing for a film at this stage of his artistic development, Eisenstein spoke of his 'strictly academical' approach:

"I make use of all available scientific data; I discuss with myself problems of programme and principle, I make calculations and draw inferences. I 'dissect music' in the course of its progress, and sometimes anticipating its progress, with the result that its elements are buried in my drawers among heaps of material relating to principle. I stop writing the scenario and instead plunge into research work, filling pages and pages with it. I don't know which is more useful, but abandoning creative work for scientific analysis is what I am often guilty of. Very often I settle a particular problem of principle only to lose all interest in its practical application."

This was not, however, the case with ALEXANDER NEVSKY; such calculations and deductions as he made were but a prelude to the act of creation. . Even the shooting-script represented only a preliminary stage in the creative process. In the heat of creation, he no longer thought about the 'hows' and 'whys', no longer translated his basic selection 'into logical evaluation' . . . but into 'direct action'. In other words, his thinking was no longer expressed in abstract theorizing, but projected directly and spontaneously into pictorial images. (page 220)

By the end of the book, in other words, Barna had to conclude that Eisenstein preplanned everything he did, and then changed his mind about some things during the course of shooting and editing – as any reasonable filmmaker would do. But no one has ever claimed otherwise! What some critics *have* claimed is that Eisenstein's films, for all their brilliance, are emotionally empty, for his preplanning was often based upon an inadequate understanding of the psychological functionings of the cinematic image. To *this* criticism (the only criticism of Eisenstein's creative method worthy of the name) Barna's argument is irrelevant.

The book also suffers from a curious editorial flaw (for which Barna is perhaps not alone responsible). After explaining the difficulty of sorting-out the frequently contradictory accounts in Eisenstein's own writings of the events in his life, Barna proceeds to quote Eisenstein copiously in support of his arguments without footnoting most of the quotations! This is done, one must assume, to avoid documenting uselessly those quotations from writings not available to the reader in English. The result, however, is that Barna's arguments become increasingly suspect, since the reader cannot even assess the date of the quoted evidence (was Eisenstein, for example, writing immediately after the event in question, or was he an older man recalling and reconstruing his youth?).

But enough criticism. With all of the above failings, this remains an indispensable book. A careful reader can distinguish its information from its arguments, and there is much information clearly presented. But its logical weaknesses are grave and must not be overlooked. Eisenstein deserves better. He deserves the careful assessment of filmmakers who are also scholars (and I don't mean Brakhage, either). Barna has promised another book analyzing Eisenstein's "work as an artist" (page 10). When it comes, I shall read it – but I shan't hold my breath in anticipation.

## Appendix

[Reply by EWC, written on 18 October 1974, to a response by Professor Seth Feldman to the above review. Professor Feldman's response and my reply were published soon after within a subsequent edition of the Journal.<sup>1</sup>]

### Barna and Feldman's Eisenstein: A Reply

I thank Mr. Seth Feldman for his criticism of my review of Yon Barna's *Eisenstein* (UFSC Newsletter, October 1974, Vol. 5 No. 1). Although I find much of interest in his remarks, and much indeed true, I think that the importance of his truths is much less than he suspects, and hence that few of his conclusions are justified.

To focus our disagreements for others, I shall perform a brief *explication de texte* on the salient passages of Mr. Feldman's critique.

...while he may be unique in seeing Eisenstein as lacking influence in film history, Cameron is not the first to challenge the Eisensteinian model of film production.

I did not claim that Eisenstein 'lacked influence in film history'. What I did suggest is that whatever influence he may have had is significantly less than the reputation he enjoys, an inverse situation to that of Griffith and Pudovkin. (Or, to use Mr. Feldman's own words of a earlier paragraph, that Eisenstein had "less effect on film history than he is generally given credit for".)

Griffith may have developed a cinematic language, but, having done so, he made this language subservient to the dictates of a pre-extant narrative tradition. Eisenstein saw film as incorporating the experience of all literary and art traditions to produce works unique in the human cultural experience. Griffith's students went on to tell good, tight movie stories. Eisenstein's students – men like Jay Leyda, Herbert Marshall and Ivor Montague – spent much of their careers relating the phenomena of cinema to all of human activity.

I agree here with Mr. Feldman's observations, though I think he surely misunderstands

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this exchange, the author and Professor Feldman, a noted authority on the life and work of Dziga Vertov, knew little of one another. A decade later, however, they had become colleagues and friends while teaching and administering at York University under very trying circumstances. Professor Feldman, later Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, was to prove to be the finest university administrator with whom the author was ever privileged to work.



what he has shown. Griffith's students did go on "to tell good, tight movie stories", in much the same sense, I suppose, that Mozart, after Haydn, went on to write good, tight little symphonies. (One is reminded of Mozart's comment: "I have never cared about doing things differently. I have wanted to do them better.") And Eisenstein's students, Leyda, Marshall and Montague among them, did indeed go on to do everything but make interesting films. But that was my point! Unlike Griffith, Ford, Renoir, Rossellini, Capra, Resnais and almost any other filmmaker of influence, Eisenstein had a curious inability to teach others how to make movies of *any* kind, much less movies about "all of human activity".

Eisenstein did more than state one side of an argument of how film was to be used; he raised the level of the entire debate. . . . were it not for his intellect – as expressed through twenty-five years of writing, teaching, lecturing, corresponding and filmmaking in both the capitalist and socialist spheres, the pursuit of film today would not enjoy what status it has.

Although this is an interesting contention, I suggest that Eisenstein, rather than "raising the level of the entire debate", misled the direction of the entire debate until very late in his life. Hence I suspect that, had Eisenstein not lived, the pursuit of film today would be just about where it is (wherever Mr. Feldman thinks that may be).

When Professor Cameron concludes that the major weakness of *Eisenstein* is Barna's "argument that Eisenstein was an improvisational rather than a preplanning artist", he is doing the book a great injustice. . . . When Cameron accuses Barna of changing his mind halfway through the book . . . he is merely accusing Barna of abandoning a position that the author never took.

I commend readers to Barna's book, of course, wherein they will find Barna saying, on page 80, that "all Eisenstein's work, was a spontaneous creation, owing *nothing* to his precise, academic calculations" [italics EWC]. Although I sympathize with Mr. Feldman's difficulties in getting round what Barna says (and I apologize for making his task even more difficult by inadvertently giving an incorrect page reference for the above quotation in my review), I do not believe that Barna could have said what he meant more clearly and explicitly: namely, that Eisenstein's works owed *nothing* to his preplanning! Although I agree with Mr. Feldman's implied judgment that Barna *ought not* to have believed any such thing, Barna unfortunately says that he does believe it, and I therefore did no injustice to his book in pointing out the error!

Throughout his review, Cameron implies that Barna's book is susceptible to certain critical weaknesses *simply* because its author is not an experienced filmmaker. . . . the suggestion that only *full-time* filmmakers can evaluate films seems as valid as the similar assertion that only the President is capable of judging the actions of the executive branch. Better film history will not grow out

of the replacement of film historians by filmmakers doing research *on a part-time basis*.

I have italicized several words and phrases in the above quotation that are Mr. Feldman's and not my own. If the reader will delete them from the quotation, I can easily agree with all but the last sentence of what remains, for to *evaluate* films one indeed need not be a filmmaker. (As Pauline Kael once put it, one needn't be a chicken to recognize a rotten egg.)

But evaluation is not explanation! To attempt to *explain* what makes films work, and in particular to attempt to determine what was and was not relevant in the prior experience of a filmmaker like Eisenstein to the final design of his films, requires that one have creative intuitions tempered by experience – or else the resulting conjectures will be of as little value as Barna's. (To continue Ms. Kael's metaphor, if one wishes to *lay* eggs, or to be enlightening to other egg layers about the psychological sources of fecundity, one had damned-well better be a chicken.)

Film historians accept the idea that their favorite theories are simply assertions waiting to be disproved. Under such conditions . . . one may eagerly await the future work of a scholar as talented as Yon Barna.

Mr. Feldman is again correct, although unfortunately this says little for the common run of film historians. For, as Popper and others have emphasized, the task of an historian is not *simply* to put forth theories and then wait for them to be proven false. An historian must rather work very hard to insure that the theories which he puts forth are not *immediately and obviously* false. In particular, an historian must insure that his theories are not immediately and obviously falsifiable by the evidence he himself puts forth!

The problem with Barna's book is that it contains within itself the disproof of its main thesis, which is why I shall await his forthcoming book on Eisenstein as 'artist' with a good deal less anticipation than Mr. Feldman.