

Brief Glimpses of Beauty

Jonas Mekas

In an interview with Swiss curator and art critic Hans-Ulrich Obrist, independent filmmaker Jonas Mekas describes the path that took him from Lithuania to becoming the 'godfather' of American avant-garde cinema. Mekas discusses his time in forced labour and displaced persons camps, describes his assimilation into postwar New York, and shares his insights on how film has been influenced by changes in technology. A selection of images from Mekas can be found in Portfolio.



BENN NORTHOVER Jonas, taxi crossing Williamsburg Bridge, 2008
賓·諾弗法 喬納斯·計程車經過威廉斯堡橋·2008·

Tell me about your early life

I remember my beginnings very well. I think that I must have been around six years old. I was sitting on my father's bed. Suddenly I felt like singing about the story of his day. It was a very faithful recitation of what he had done on that day. My mother and father listened to me and I can still remember their amazement. I was entranced. They were my first audience. Since then, I have been trying to achieve that same intensity and closeness to everyday reality that I managed in my recitation that day. When I film today, I unconsciously want to achieve some sense of adventure and excitement as I did then. It was then that I think I reached the peak of my poetic life. Ever since, I have only tried to recreate it.

In Lithuania you were actively involved in writing for anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi publications. What impact did this have on your later work?

The Soviets marched into Lithuania in 1940 when I was in the seventh grade. A year or so later, the Germans pushed the Russians out and Lithuania fell under German control. During both occupations, a network of anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi underground publication sprang up. Their function was to listen to the forbidden, mostly British radio, and inform people of what was happening in Lithuania and in the outside world. Both the Soviets and the Germans did everything to eradicate the publications I was involved with. Those publications were strictly forbidden. One of the methods

Jonas Mekas is a filmmaker based in New York (USA).

they used to trace them was by studying the typefaces of the typewriters used, so I had to keep mine well-hidden. But one night it was gone. We could not take the chance of the thief selling the typewriter and the Germans discovering where it had come from. I informed my friends and a decision was made that I should immediately disappear. Fake papers were made for me and my brother. A few days later the two of us boarded a train that was supposed to take us to Vienna. However, our train was captured by military police and we ended up in a forced labour camp with French and Italian war prisoners. My involvement in the underground press had affected the direction of my life very drastically. I was suddenly in the West while my childhood friends remained in the East.

What impact did Fred Zinnemann's film *The Search* have on you?

After the war ended, we spent from June 1945 to October 1949 in a series of displaced persons camps. These camps were run under the supervision of the US Army. For entertainment, we were able to see a lot of cheap movies. But they didn't really inspire us. There was, however, the beginnings of postwar German cinema emerging, with films from directors such as Helmut Kautner and Wolfgang Staudte. We found this cinema exciting. Then came Zinnemann's *The Search*, a film that was supposed to portray the life of the displaced persons. I remember that it made us very angry. We thought that the film had no idea what it was really like for a displaced person to be uprooted from his home. This inspired us to begin thinking about making our own film about the life of displaced persons. We decided that that was what we wanted to do: cinema was our new life. We began reading everything we could find in libraries and bookshops about cinema. We wrote several scripts for poetry documentaries that were never produced.

What effect did New York have on you when you moved there after the war?

During Soviet and German occupation and the five years in displaced persons camps, in the ruins of what once was Germany, we were starved for culture and what we had missed during our younger years. When we landed in New York, we felt like we were dropped off in Paradise; the city was full of cinemas, actors and jazz. The exciting and emerging avant-garde films from Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Maya Deren and Sidney Peterson in those days were called experimental. Then there was the Beat Generation, Abstract Expressionism, Tenth Street, and eventually, Happening Theatre. It was incredibly rich and exciting and we absorbed it like dry sponges. We came to New York disappointed with humanity but discovered and got infected by a fresh energy for life. New York saved my sanity.

How does filmmaking differ inside and outside the USA?

The beauty of national cinema is that it is local. Each country makes films in its own language to please its own people. That means that when I see a Greek or Algerian film, I get a little window into their minds, concerns and fantasies. And the worse the film, the better they usually reflect those characteristics. The avant-garde is different. There is very little local colour in avant-garde film.

JONAS MEKAS *To New York With Love*, 2008; *Elvis*, c. 1972; *Andy Warhol*, c. 1968 喬納斯·梅卡斯 取自《吾愛紐約》·2008; 艾維斯·約1972·安迪·沃霍爾·約1968·

Maybe there was some in the earlier decades but the avant-garde of today is universal. In addition, there is no longer a dominant country or city in the avant-garde. There was a time when New York, Paris or San Francisco were dominant. But today, it is a global, avant-garde community.

How far removed can your films become from reality during the extraction process?

Say my films are like wine, or bread. It's all real. But during the process of winemaking or breadmaking, the original materials get transformed into something else. So I extract little fragments of reality and I make something different out of them. But I have to say that since I switched to video and especially during the *365 Day Project*, I became interested in how to eliminate that transformation. The challenge is how to record moments of real life and catch the essence of the moment in one unbroken take. No editing. One take, one shot. It sounds easy, but it's not. You have to be able to wait patiently for that moment. I continue to face the most difficult challenge: being really individual while taping real life situations. I think I am coming closer to succeeding, but it takes a total submersion of my own identity; it's a meeting of trance and madness.

What role does re-use play in your role as filmmaker?

I am more into using the filmed material in new ways. I am very interested in what happens when I break up a film into four parts and present it on four monitors. It's no longer a linear kind of memoir, there is a totally different energy that comes in. That content is transformed into a different and more contemporary event. I know that some of my fellow filmmakers look at this as almost sacrilegious. They say that film is film and that you should leave it alone. But I think that both are legit. I am very immersed in the possibilities of this way of re-using my films.

What made you decide to film every day?

It all happened gradually. I was too busy for a time-consuming film project. But I had a craving. So I kept filming, I was a camera junkie. It took a decade to begin to see that it looked like the equivalent of a written diary. Only at that point did I become more conscious of what I was doing and became interested in the possibilities of this new form of cinema. You have to get into the drill and film every day: walking, living and being awake, always being in the state of NOW, now is the moment! So I take my camera out of the bag and I film. I have no idea why, but I have to film it. So I film it.

How has the advent of new technologies affected your relationship to filmmaking?

Changing technology pushed out film so I switched to video. Then, avant-garde movie theatres – in universities, colleges, galleries, and museums – began switching to video and computers. So I embraced the Internet. My most ambitious recent venture, the *365 Day Project*, where I made one video for each day of the year 2007, was released through the Internet. The Internet is the People's Underground. It's unique, not like anything before. It's part of the technological avant-garde. It has nothing to do with past avant-garde phenomena that swept through the arts. In film and

video as still practiced outside the Internet, there is no avant-garde as far as I can see, I am not sure there is avant-garde in any of the arts today. But, as it was said long ago, when arms are talking arts are silent. And there are a lot of arms all over the planet.

Can you talk a little about this transition and about the shift from collective viewing to individual viewing?

The individual viewing of film and video is not so new. I remember when George Maciunas used to watch movies on his tiny 6x8in TV screen all night long by himself. The amazing thing that I learned from him is that you don't have to watch a Western movie on a large screen to get the feeling of space in the Wild West. In fact, he told me that after a while that 6x8 space becomes as wide as the widest movie-house screen. It's all in your mind. The tiny iPod screen is very wide. It's less visceral – maybe more mind than body – but these are the normal evolutionary changes in life and culture. People who watch things on iPods still attend screenings in public movie theatres. But the small screen, the iPod screen, is dominant among the younger generation. The shift from communal to private viewing is here and it won't go away. But museums and galleries won't go away either. Even some works that are presented only on the Internet and viewed on iPods will eventually end up in museums and galleries. The future is unpredictable.



JONAS MEKAS *From Walden*, 1969 喬納斯·梅卡斯 取自《華爾登》·1960·

Finally, how important is the element of opposition to society in creating avant-garde film?

When you look at avant-garde artists of the past, you find a certain kind of schizophrenia. The manifestos are angry and full of oppositional stances, but the works are positive and exciting, a jump forward from their contemporaries. Form, content, and technique move ahead. The oppositional stance is needed only psychologically; it is like an excuse to make a drastic change in their practices. The avant-garde film was not opposed to Hollywood film: we were simply different animals. Same in the arts. Man cannot live by melodrama alone. And also, man cannot live by steak alone: occasionally we need some salad. Put some manure on the roots so the tree grows better. I learned that from my father. ■