

## 4. John Pruitt

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### Jonas Mekas: A European Critic in America

*And so this makes it that Henry James just went on doing what American literature had always done, the form was always the form of the contemporary English one, but the disembodied way of disconnecting something from anything and anything from something was the American one. The way it had of often all never having any living was an American one.*

*Some say that it is repression but no it is not repression it is a lack of connection, of there being no connection with living a daily living because there is none, that makes American writing what it always has been and what it will continue to become.*

—Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*

*On one side there is Hollywood; on the other side, are the experimental filmmakers. The middle, the largest area, the whole human reality, sung by the poets and painted on canvas from time immemorial—as the source of all art—is lying fallow.*

—Jonas Mekas, "Experimental Film in America"

ANY OVERVIEW of Jonas Mekas's criticism must first confront the anomaly that this European exile, profoundly influenced by the polemics of Italian neorealism, would become the champion of the filmmakers Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage,

Kenneth Anger, and Michael Snow, artists who strove to detach their works from the everyday social realities that played so large a role in the major European films of the postwar period. The story of Mekas's "conversion" is a crucial one because it reveals the complex, ambivalent nature of his critical stance and the continuity between his criticism and his filmmaking endeavors.

In 1955, Mekas and his associates founded *Film Culture* magazine, a review that contained substantial studies of past cinematic achievements, but whose main thrust was to support worthy contemporary filmmaking, to help found a "New American Cinema" in which the filmmakers would control their own work, free from the Hollywood industry.

In order to replace meretriciousness with authenticity, there was no question but that such a movement had to look to Europe, which meant an all but complete rejection of the American avant-garde. The lead article in the first issue, "Towards a Theory of Dynamic Realism," was written by Edouard L. de Laurot, like Mekas a displaced European. His guiding assumption was that "dynamic realism" was not a mere slave to actuality, but rather actively engaged social causes. After *Un chien Andalou*, de Laurot pointed out, Buñuel made *Land without Bread*, and after *Entr'acte*, René Clair made *A nous la liberté*—that is to say, after formal experimentation, the European avant-garde "advanced" to a more mature social vision. According to this progressivist view, American abstract surrealist experimenters were retrograde. Europe was waiting for America to catch up, and *Film Culture* was to lead the way (de Laurot 1955). De Laurot's vision was compatible with that of most of the regular early writers for *Film Culture*, who included Mekas himself, George Fenin, Siegfried Kracauer, Lotte Eisner, Amos Vogel, Jay Leyda, and two who focused primarily on classic films, Andrew Sarris and Herman G. Weinberg. The contributors representing a more purely aesthetic stance were fewer: Parker Tyler, Rudolf Arnheim, and Hans Richter—but of these three, only Tyler's articles made a particular point of championing Americans (e.g., Sidney Peterson and Stan Brakhage) who might not easily fit the mold of the engaged artist making independent features and documentaries.

The operative word in virtually all Mekas's editorials and critical surveys of the late fifties is that slippery one: "realism." He recognized the Italian neorealist school as being the dominant movement in postwar Europe, and through his understanding of its style he interpreted most of what he found significant in contemporary filmmaking. In praising a new group of young British filmmakers he virtually recapitulated the point of view of Bazin or Zavattini:

In their harsh, black and white colors and direct documentary approach, they brought to the screen images of contemporary London, with its dance halls, its night streets, its playgrounds, its warehouses. The people in these films were real, not actors. They looked and acted and spoke and behaved and moved as their contemporaries did. And there was no phony glamorizing, no artificial tragedies. (Mekas 1960a, 2)

His perspective was consistent enough so that even in championing Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy* in 1960, a film that had an aesthetic tint to it because it portrayed a New York milieu of poets, painters, and musicians, he was quick to offer the following qualification: "We know that Richter and Cocteau have used friends—painters and poets in their films. However, they used them in symbolic situations, moments. *Pull My Daisy* has nothing to do with any such literary symbols. The situations are everyday situations, with no other intentions" (ibid., 14).

As late as 1962, realism was still a leading criterion for him. His loosely historical survey of the New American Cinema asserted that it was founded on the New York realists and documentarists, such as James Agee, Helen Levitt, and Sydney Meyers. Attached to what in retrospect appears a far weaker brand of American filmmaking, Mekas had not yet discovered the strong point of American film. Symptomatic of his critical confusion with respect to the United States at this stage was his linking of Rossellini, Renoir, Hitchcock, and Hawks into one grand tradition from which he wanted new filmmakers to take their cues. No doubt he based his reflections on the pioneering work of *Cahiers du cinéma*, but one wonders if he realized how far apart in sensibility Hawks and Hitchcock were from Rossellini and Renoir. The realism of the latter two was firmly rooted in Europe and a distinct social milieu, while the films of Hawks and Hitchcock belonged to the insular, fantastic creations of Hollywood. *The Big Sleep* and *Vertigo* represented popular American Gothic at its best, their effectiveness a function of their unreality. Yet Mekas could praise Hawks and Hitchcock and still condemn the fifties Hollywood film in general by saying: "Nothing in these films is real; even death, the most powerful of realities, becomes mere decor, one more stone in the general mosaic of violence and force" (Mekas 1956, 1-2).

But in the United States, films in which "even death, the most powerful of realities, becomes mere decor" often have both greater formal integrity and a moral edge, while Hollywood's few attempts at realism have not been its strong suit. When Hollywood becomes socially concerned, its hypocrisy and fairy-tale formulas only be-

come all the more obvious and offensive. So pervasive are the formulas that these films are virtually the same across the generations, and equally unconvincing as works of art—from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) to *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to *On the Waterfront* (1954) to *Wall Street* (1987). In film there has never been a school of American realism to draw on as a strong tradition. Even the thirties school of American documentarists (vastly overrated, in my estimation, due to an insufficiently penetrating sociopolitical vision) seems to have been making fairy tales of sorts. For all their anti-Hollywood rhetoric, today most of these classic American documentaries come off as Hollywoodized versions of Soviet prototypes. It is still difficult for many intellectuals to acknowledge that Sternberg's *Scarlet Empress* could have had a greater influence in establishing a New American Cinema than Ralph Steiner and Willard van Dyke's *City*.

On the other side from Hollywood in Mekas's formulation were the so-called experimenters. Here too, Italian neorealism was the least appropriate lens through which to view the American avant-garde with any kind of sympathy. Predictably, in his first attempt at a critical appraisal of what he then called "experimental cinema," Mekas expressed his negative judgment in vitriolic fashion:

Their protagonists seem to live under a strange spell. They do not appear to be part of the surrounding world, despite many naturalistic details that we find in these films. They are exalted, tormented, not related in any comprehensible way to society or place or family or any person. It is impossible to imagine these characters buying food or working in a shop or bringing up children or participating in any concrete manner in the activities of other men—they are not much more real than fictitious characters in space novels. In these films, touch with reality seems to be very feeble. Instead of a human being, we find a poetic version of a modern zombie: After all our efforts to make it alive, we find ourselves stuck with a corpse. (Mekas 1955, 16)

He saw as harmful precisely that "feeble touch with reality" that Gertrude Stein had once proposed as the positive characteristic of American art. Having been immersed in the political and social turmoil of Europe for ten years, and having arrived on the American scene a mere six years before, he was not yet in the position to understand his new homeland or to see its idiosyncrasies as possible virtues within its own tradition. In fact, he has more or less said as much, and subsequently referred to the essay as a "Saint-Augustine-before-the-conversion piece" (Mekas 1970, 26). The word "conversion," used somewhat ironically but nevertheless highly character-

istic of his rhetoric, is misleading since it implies that Mekas's change of perspective was a sudden reversal. In fact, his acceptance of the American avant-garde was gradual and did not really signify the wholesale jettisoning of his former critical values.

Through the sixties and into the seventies, in his column for the *Village Voice*, there were numerous occasions when his loyalty to a realist tradition would come to the fore. In 1966, ruminating on the Vietnam War and ghetto disturbances, he called for a new 8 mm journalism: "Why should we leave all reporting to the press and TV?" (Mekas 1972, 236). In 1968, Mekas announced the creation of a "radical film newsreel service" (ibid., 305). In 1971, he reflected on the then-emerging video art and thought of it in terms so consistent with his 1955 tirade against the American avant-garde that one can almost consider his reaction a milder, more considered recapitulation of that essay: "On one hand we talk about our involvement in society, revolution, etc., we march and we protest and we go to Washington D.C., on the other hand we have this fantastic, miracle too which we could use to criticize, to record, to celebrate, or reveal society around us, to expose it to ourselves and others; instead we prefer to play abstract artists. I think it's pretentious."<sup>1</sup>

A realism in opposition to abstraction is clear enough, but it is surprising to see Mekas making virtually the same critical pronouncements no matter what kind of film was under discussion. The words "real" and "reality" were frequently employed simply to assess artistic effectiveness. To take one of many possible examples, in castigating some works of East European animation he declared that the works had "nothing to do either with visible reality nor the reality of our imaginations" (Mekas 1972, 286). On the other hand, he admired some recent children's animated films: "It's the realism, the poetic realism of these films that amazes me most" (ibid.).

In sticking so doggedly yet inconsistently to his particular terminology, Mekas was inevitably led to paradoxical pronouncements:

Cornell's images are all very real. Even when they are taken from other movies, as in *Rose Hobart*, they seem to gain the quality of reality. The Hollywood unreality is transported into Cornelian unreality, which is very very real. Here is an evidence of the power of the artist to transform reality by choosing, by picking out only those details which correspond to some subtle inner movement or vision, or dream. No matter what he takes, be it a totally "artificial" reality, or bits of "actual" reality, he transforms them, bit by bit, into new unities, new things, boxes, collages, movies, with no other things on earth resembling them. (Ibid., 408)

<sup>1</sup> Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice*, 20 May 1971, 72.

In short, a real image is one that resembles nothing else; Mekas's term proves insufficient to account for a highly individualized vision that he nevertheless wants to acknowledge. Not unaware of the conceptual tension the term "realism" implied, Mekas could state that "whenever a work of art fails it fails formally," but form is nevertheless a secondary phenomenon, whose characteristics are shaped by "what details of reality are selected from the huge mass of reality and how they are put together."<sup>2</sup> Artistic style is really a form of perspective on a reality that has its own integrity prior to the creation of a work of art:

Artists, that is, film-makers, always used real-life techniques in cinema. It's only a question of the emphasis, of the degree. And the emphasis, the degree, the angle always comes from the immediate (contemporary) needs of man. The theatre of Stanislavsky is based on the use of "real-life" experiences, too. All good acting is based on "real" experiences. But there are so many levels and aspects to this "real truth" in which we live. The emphasis, the styles keep changing. (Mekas 1972, 304)

The reality that the new filmmaker would document was a multifaceted one precisely because there were so many possible perspectives, and thus there was a corner reserved for those "film poets" who chose to record interiorized dramas. Pure abstraction, too, a *document* of mind and spiritual states in Mekas's formulation, was part of the total picture—but at first it was a small, ambiguous part. In 1959 Mekas wrote a long report to Europe on the state of new filmmaking in the United States for *Sight and Sound*, with much attention devoted to recent documentary and socially oriented films: Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy*, John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back Africa*, and Edward Bland's *Cry of Jazz*. There is a brief but appreciative mention of *Desistfilm*, a Brakhage work that predates the other films under discussion and as such represents an earlier, less-radical style that hovers between an adolescent self-consciousness and a vague awareness of social rituals. In other words, Brakhage was squeezed into the survey as almost another new-wave director even though by then his work had taken off in another direction. Perhaps it was also in part the brevity of films like Brakhage's that earned them only a minor, if respectable, position. This is still the attitude of many mainstream critics today, who will grant the avant-garde credibility so long as it can be relegated to a secondary position—

<sup>2</sup> Jonas Mekas, *Village Voice*, 21 January 1971, 61.

usually that of an experimental training ground whose practitioners are waiting for a break into the big time.

But Mekas was more open-minded and more sensitive than even the better mainstream critics, and within a couple of years of his *Sight and Sound* article he was forced to recognize that the independent, realist feature film was not developing—that if that particular form were to continue it could only continue as a hapless compromise between art and industry. The dilemma was anticipated by the critical controversy over the first and second versions of *Shadows*. Cassavetes had reshot particular scenes, making it more commercially viable, and Mekas had seen this as a fatal betrayal—a kowtow to Hollywood. On the other hand, he saw that Brakhage and his fellow film poets such as Markopoulos, Breer, Smith, and Anger were not making compromises and were advancing their art. It was high time the primacy of their achievement was acknowledged. What in the late fifties had seemed like perhaps a minor element in the larger picture had revealed itself to have been the true dominant force all along. After Mekas sent out the call in *Film Culture* for the new American filmmakers, the people who answered the challenge were not the ones he had really expected. The fact that they were refining their particular brand of art regardless of whether he paid them attention or not only forced him to recognize that his adopted homeland had an indigenous tradition with which he had to reckon. He could not demand that American filmmakers do such and such; rather, he had to learn just what it was the best of them were doing and why they staunchly refused to conform to European models even though the European school of filmmaking was the center of attention for the majority of serious critics and intellectuals.

As a displaced European heavily involved in the American filmmaking scene, Mekas was in a privileged position to understand the schools of filmmaking on both sides of the Atlantic. While never wavering from his assertion that Markopoulos, Warhol, and the like represented *the* most important mode of American filmmaking, when he encountered the European critics of the American avant-garde he often defended the American style on *European* terms—namely, the issue of the social responsibility of the artist. As would be expected in such discussions, the term “reality” was never far away. In a particularly instructive interview, Mekas debated the French film critic Louis Marcorelles:

**LM:** This new cinema of Brazil, Canada, Hungary is definitely very socially rooted, engaged. It may not be so individualistic as the under-

ground cinema. The fight that these film-makers are leading may seem to be divorced from the underground.

**JM:** It is not the question that they are engaged and we not. It is a question of different realities, of different concerns in each country. The artist in Brazil feels that his people are hungry; he feels that that is an important reality of his country; so he makes a film about bread. We feel that there is a different reality that is important in America today. . . .

**LM:** I personally feel that cinema should be highly socially responsible, in the Brechtian line. Cinema has to be located in a given time, even if it's poetry—in a given time, a given purpose.

**JM:** But that's what we are doing. In Brazil they have hunger problems. But here we have hunger of the soul. . . .

**LM:** I feel that the underground cinema is completely divorced from America.

**JM:** That is because you don't know what's the real reality of America that really asks to be brought out and developed. (Ibid., 239–40)

One could of course quibble with my point here by questioning how the word "reality" is actually being employed in the particular historical context (the mid-1960s) of my chosen example, and assert that Mekas is summoning to his aid what might be termed a naive "hippie ontology," perhaps inspired by the then-fashionable popular readings of Eastern philosophy. While there is no doubt that in the cult of drugs and Buddhism, "reality" was an ambiguous entity to say the least, Mekas's point of view at the time was nevertheless consistent with his earlier, "pre-sixties" concerns. Perhaps unconsciously there was just so far he could go in accepting the American cinema on its own terms.

The clearest case of what this meant with respect to the qualified nature of Mekas's "conversion" can be found in his famous appreciation of the earlier films of Andy Warhol. In writing on *Poor Little Rich Girl* in 1965, he went back to Italian neorealism for his measuring stick: "It was an old dream of Cesare Zavattini to make a film two hours long which would show two hours from the life of a woman, minute by minute. It was up to Andy Warhol to do it, to show that it could be done, and done beautifully" (ibid., 186). In the following year there were similar echoes in his impassioned defense of *The Chelsea Girls*: "No doubt most of the critics and 'normal' audiences will dismiss *The Chelsea Girls* as having nothing to do either with cinema or 'real' life." Mekas continued by emphasizing the centrality of the latter value: "The terror and hardness that we



see in *The Chelsea Girls* is the same terror and hardness that is burning Vietnam; and it's the essence and blood of our culture, of our ways of living; This is the Great Society" (ibid., 257). A heavily politicized critic might have looked at *The Chelsea Girls* and taken Warhol to task for an inner directedness—an ironic detachment (even in the "Hanoi Hannah" sequences) from the political forces erupting in the United States. No doubt the Jonas Mekas of 1955 would have said something vehemently negative along those lines. If anything, *The Chelsea Girls* contains in more pronounced form those attributes of the American avant-garde that he had found positively distasteful in 1955. I find it worth emphasizing that in praising the film Mekas does not adopt, say, an orthodox modernist position, which might have focused on the evolution of cinematic language per se (e.g., Warhol's use of a double screen and the supposed random order of projecting the reels); rather, he finds in it the values he had sought and missed in the American film scene of the mid-fifties: an authenticity and a moral force.

Admittedly, one could make a case that *The Chelsea Girls* is a socially committed document, but frankly I find Zavattini and Warhol to be strange bedfellows indeed. To call a film symptomatic of a social problem is different from saying that it honestly confronts that problem, but Mekas comes close to saying that these are the same thing. That Mekas took a moral, humanistic stance in defending the film should come as no surprise, especially when one considers the turmoil then erupting in the United States. But the next cinema to which he lent his support was on its face more detached even than Warhol's films. Roughly a year after *The Chelsea Girls*, Michael Snow's *Wavelength* appeared, a film that appropriated Warhol's long-take and impersonal camera style—the style that, according to Mekas, had revealed a new, objective, real presence. But Snow willfully shut out the real, and others (Frampton, Gehr, and the like) followed. In engendering a new formalist (or "structuralist") cinema, *Wavelength* was the most important film of 1967; Vietnam made no appearance in it.

That was no accident, for the sociopolitical realities of the time threatened the premises of the avant-garde film movement. Nowhere is this more clear than in the work of Bruce Baillie, who made two particularly impressive films in the mid-sixties that were both political in nature and highly wrought formally: *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1963–1964) and *Quixote* (1965). But I find both works troubling, especially the latter, in which the issue of Vietnam creeps in at the end and the inevitable "sloganeering" tears apart the finer sensitivity of the earlier sections. Apparently, Baillie had

enormous problems finding a final form for *Quixote*; the work went through a couple of revisions and as a completed work never left its maker fully satisfied. I am venturing that it was precisely the issue of so-called engaged film that caused Baillie some confusion. The following year, 1966, the Vietnam War was more of an issue than ever, and Baillie's art beat a retreat from the social scene into a more purely aesthetic realm, where he created two of his most perfectly realized efforts, *All My Life* and *Castro Street*.

Through the twenty or so years of Mekas's regular public writing, he never lost interest in the wide spectrum of film's manifestations. Even though he became almost entirely identified with the avant-garde, he continued to write about European film—to help reassess Rossellini's "Bergman" films, to celebrate Carl Dreyer—and to defend underappreciated filmmakers on the fringe of the American avant-garde, such as Ricky Leacock and Jerome Hill. In the mid-seventies he even interviewed John Cassavetes, despite the fact that Cassavetes' cinema had less and less to do with the American avant-garde. Mekas's quarrels with Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* took Sarris to task not for defending what the latter considered the best of Hollywood, but rather for writing about the kind of cinema he knew little about. In turn, Mekas maintained that there were certain films he did not cover, not because he did not like them, but because others like Sarris gave them sufficient attention. His insistence that the kind of filmmaking Brakhage represented was film "poetry," as opposed to the larger novelistic tradition of the feature narrative, affirmed the cultural continuity of a type of filmmaking that appeared "revolutionary" only to its detractors.

One of Mekas's most eloquent and extended defenses of the poetic film, written after his long relationship with the *Village Voice* was over and during a brief stint with the now-defunct *Soho Weekly News*, brought him to a point, finally, where it appeared he had actually found a way of defending American art on *its* terms—by finding a unique place to put it: "Most poetry, certain kinds and styles of prose, music, painting, etc. will remain restricted, personal, of interest only to those who are pulled to them from inner necessity. And it's the miracle of it all that the human spirit has so many different nooks and corners—including a little corner labeled 'Avant-garde Film'—where one can find privacy of one's soul."<sup>3</sup> Mekas's humanism will not allow him to be alone with his soul with quite the same detached absolutism of, say, Wallace Stevens, just as in

<sup>3</sup> Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Soho Weekly News*, 20 May 1976, 15.

*Notes for Jerome* he cannot walk alone among the hills on the French Mediterranean coast without recalling that Petrarch once strolled there too. Indeed, he seemed to say in his column that the very "aleness" of a European was essentially a contradiction in terms: "The soul of a European is full of deep grooves, molds, forms of past cultures. He may even die with his grooves, without escaping them. That is his fate" (Mekas 1972, 27). And if the soul is never alone, then neither is a work of art. In his diaries Mekas quoted a fellow artist-in-exile, ironically one who also has been associated with an American avant-garde, abstract movement, and whose words presumably struck him particularly: "De Kooning: 'There's no way of looking at a work of art by itself; it's not self-evident—it needs a history, it needs a lot of talking about; it's part of a whole man's life'" (Mekas 1960b, 6 August). In plain language not unlike his own, much of the spirit of Jonas Mekas's film criticism, consistent over a thirty-five year period despite apparent bobbings and weavings, is summed up right there: its practical striving for representational completeness, its dogged refusal to lose sight of what he called "the whole human reality."

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