

Interview with Jonas Mekas

by Brian Frye

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For a Jonas Mekas film and videography, please click [here](#).

Curator, writer and filmmaker Jonas Mekas is the godfather of American avant-garde filmmaking, or the New American Cinema, as he dubbed it in the late 1950s. The founder of Anthology Film Archives, the Filmmakers' Cooperative and *Film Culture* magazine, Mekas helped shape the public image of avant-garde filmmaking in America, as well as profoundly influenced its self-identity.

Born in Lithuania in 1922, Mekas spent the Second World War in displaced persons camps before emigrating to the United States with his brother, Adolfas, in 1949. He discovered avant-garde film at venues like Amos Vogel's pioneering Cinema 16, and began screening films himself in 1953. In 1954, Mekas published the first issue of *Film Culture*, America's iconoclastic answer to *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Originally devoted to auteurist criticism, featuring Andrew Sarris, Peter Bogdanovich, Herman Weinberg and many others, *Film Culture* ultimately became the mouthpiece of the American avant-garde. In 1958, Mekas began writing his "Movie Journal" column for the *Village Voice*, spotlighting the newest and most radical filmmakers in New York City. In 1962, he founded the Filmmakers' Cooperative (FMC) with Emile de Antonio, Shirley Clarke and others. The FMC remains in operation, with the world's largest circulating collection of avant-garde films. In 1964, Mekas founded the Filmmakers' Cinémathèque, which eventually grew into Anthology Film Archives, one of the world's largest and most important repositories of avant-garde films. With Stan Brakhage, Ken Kelman and P. Adams Sitney, Mekas formed the Essential Cinema Collection in 1970, one of the first attempts to establish a canon of avant-garde film.

In addition to writing and curating, since arriving in the United States, Mekas has also worked as a filmmaker. His early narrative films (*Guns of the Trees*, 1961) and documentaries (*The Brig*, 1963) are still highly regarded. Today he is best known for his signature diary films like *Walden* (1969); *Lost, Lost, Lost*, (1975); *Reminiscences of a Voyage to Lithuania*, (1972); and *Zefiro Torna*, (1992). Mekas calls himself a "filmer," a



Walden

man who makes films about life. His films have screened extensively at festivals and museums around the world. I spoke with Mekas earlier this year at Anthology Film Archives at 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue in New York City.

- BF

BF: When did you first become interested in film? Was that in Europe, or when you came to America?

JM: The first film I saw was a graduation present from our teacher when I finished the fourth grade. She took us to the city and we saw a melodrama, which I don't remember, and a Mickey Mouse movie, which I still remember. Then I saw no movies until I was maybe sixteen or seventeen, when Soviet tanks rolled in and set up tents and showed propaganda movies. I saw them, but I had no interest. The first time I really got interested was after the war in 1945, in Wiesbaden in a displaced persons camp where the American Army showed Tarzan movies and, you know, all those movies that they show to the Army. But one evening I saw *The Treasure of The Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948), and I thought that there was something to it. Especially I remember liking the ending, and the desert, the sense of something crawling. Visually it was interesting. Then I saw another movie, I think it was by Zinnemann, made in Switzerland I think, *The Search* (Fred Zinnemann, 1948), about displaced persons, made immediately after the war. And I saw it with my brother and we got very angry about how little understanding of the real situation there was in this film, about what it means to be displaced. We got angry and we started writing scripts. That's when we decided to make our own films. That's where it begins. But it wasn't until we came to New York that we actually began making films. You know, in a displaced persons camp, there is no way of getting money, a camera or film or anything. And when we arrived in New York, we had not really seen anything really decent. So it wasn't until late in '49 when we arrived in New York that we began going to MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) and seeing all the varieties of cinema. We rented a Bolex, the next week practically after we arrived, and started fooling around. That was the beginning.

BF: What were the circumstances in which you came to the United States?

JM: The United Nations Refugee Organization dumped me here because they were dissolving the displaced person camps in Germany. After the war, I spent practically four years in displaced person camps there. I am not an immigrant. I was brought here and I stayed here.

BF: You couldn't go back to Lithuania?

JM: No, no, no. In Lithuania, my mother told me later, the secret Soviet police for one year were waiting for me in the bushes not far from the house. They thought I would be returning, that maybe I was just hiding in the woods. If I had remained, there wouldn't be me.

BF: What was the reason for that? Why were they looking for you?

JM: The reason was because I was very involved in the underground activities and publications, various anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi publications. And I was also already known for writing poems. Actually I wrote an anti-Stalin anthem, which we used to sing. I had no future in Lithuania; there was no future and no life for me there. Actually, you know, the time came when my brother and I had to leave our town so we took a train to Vienna. We had to run away because we were about to be discovered. And that's where my life in civilization begins. We never reached Vienna, the train was seized by German military police and we ended up in a forced labor camp near Hamburg. So that's where we spent the last year of the war.

BF: So, what was filmmaking and film exhibition like in New York when you arrived?

JM: In 1950-51, my New York life begins. I keep stressing New York, because I don't know America. All my American life has been in New York. New York's movie life was very busy in 1950. First, on 42nd street between 6th and 8th Avenue, there were maybe fifteen movie houses, and you could see everything, and spend all night watching movies. You could see four or five westerns. You know, they were specializing: westerns, imported European films – 'art' films, they were then called – comedies, short subjects, newsreels and so on. Now, if you wanted to see old movies and classics, you went to MoMA, which we did. And we did not miss a single day, because we wanted to catch up with everything. Or if you wanted to see newsreels, there was a theater just for newsreels. If you wanted to see the avant-garde, the new experimental films, you went to Cinema 16 programs. Every month they had a new program. If you were of a more Trotskyite persuasion, you went to Club Cinema on 6th Avenue and 10th Street, where every Friday or Saturday night – I don't remember – they showed documentaries of a leftist persuasion. If you wanted to see very rare early silent films of various formats, you went to the Theodore Huff Society, again once a week, run by Herman Weinberg, Bill Everson, Bill Kenly and some other people. I'm talking about 1950.

In 1953, I started the first screenings of what was called at that time Experimental Films. I showed the Whitney Brothers, Gregory Markopoulos, Kenneth Anger. I started my own screenings at Gallery East, which was on Avenue A and 1st street. As you can see, I didn't move very far... [Anthology Film Archives is at 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue] Also in 1953, a woman by the name of Dorothy Brown had weekend screenings in her loft on Ludlow Street. I helped her. Around the same time, Gideon Bachmann was running the Film Study Group, which I joined. I helped to write notes. Once a week or so, or every two weeks, we had screenings, usually with filmmakers present. And on it goes. And if you were clever enough, which of course I was, I also used to sneak into the New York University. As part of the film department, George Amberg – who began as a ballet critic, and wrote a very important book on ballet – was holding screenings of the avant-garde films for students, but you could sneak in. And he had filmmakers present. That's where I met Gregory Markopoulos. George was very verbal and perceptive – he could really go into the work and explain it, he was a very brilliant person. You could also sneak into the New School for Social Research where Arthur Knight had classes on the independent, avant-garde, experimental film. With filmmakers also usually present. So, as you can see, there was a lot going on. Actually, the second evening after arriving in New York, I was already at the movies. I saw *The Fall of the House of Usher* (Jean Epstein, 1928) and *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) on, I think, 16th Street or somewhere, at the New

York Film Society run by Rudolf Arnheim.

BF: That was the Epstein version of the *Fall of the House of Usher*?

JM: Yes, Epstein, yes. So there was a lot of choice.

BF: And you attended most of these assorted screenings pretty regularly?

JM: I did not miss a single one.

BF: Were there other people who were also attending them regularly?

JM: Yes, you could always see Gideon Bachmann or Donald Phelps who writes also a lot about dance, I think. I used to see him also sneaking into Amberg's classes. There were a few others, like Frank Kuenstler.

BF: What were the circumstances in which you started showing films yourself in '53?

JM: I met a friend, Louis Brigante. I don't know how I met him, maybe at one of those screenings, in '51 or '52. Very early. And he was editor and publisher of a monthly literary newspaper *Intro Bulletin*. And then he opened an art gallery on the corner of Avenue A and 1st Street in 1953, which was known as Gallery East. And he said to me, why don't you show some films there? So he invited me and I showed film as an addition to the paintings on display. I started screening avant-garde, experimental films there. And I also had a little column in the *Intro Bulletin*, which was called "Movie Journal".

BF: So that's where you started "Movie Journal"?

JM: Nobody knows that, and nobody should know that, because I wrote some very stupid things. I did not know much about avant-garde film at that point. The real "Movie Journal" begins in '58 in the *Voice*, in the *Village Voice*.

BF: How did that happen?

JM: I simply went there and asked the editor Jerry Tallmer why they didn't have a movie column, why they don't write about film. So he said, okay, we have nobody, you want to write about movies, write. So I did. Before I asked that question, I had already done some writing for the *Voice* on other subjects like dance, mime, theater, etc. So that's how it started. I did not know at that time that it would become so permanent. I covered – for like two or three years – everything. I had to defend, you know, a lot of nouvelle vague films, and then Antonioni, and certain Hollywood directors, like, say, Aldrich. Then in '62, the independent, avant-garde, underground activities had expanded so much that I felt I had to devote all my time to them. So I invited Andrew Sarris to join me and cover the commercial cinema, I pulled him into the *Voice*. But I stuck more and more only to the independents.

BF: When did you start *Film Culture*?

JM: The first issue of *Film Culture* came out in December '54.

BF: So you were already writing for *Film Culture* before you started writing for the *Voice*?

JM: Yes. And actually in '55 I invited Andrew Sarris to join the editorial board. That's where he published his first pieces. And Eugene Archer, and later Peter Bogdanovich and many, many others.

BF: The early issues of *Film Culture* seem to focus more on European feature filmmakers than avant-garde cinema.

JM: Yes, because there was no other magazine at the time covering such topics. *Films in Review* was the only other publication, but it was a ridiculous publication, infantile. Then the University of California, once every two years or so, or once a year, used to bring out *Hollywood Quarterly*, a serious publication. But they published maybe only five or six issues during five, six years. There was *Film Sense*, which was published practically by the American Communist Party. It had some good writing though: Howard Lawson and several others. But it was only eight or four pages, a little thing. And that's about it. There was nothing else. So we had to cover both commercial cinema and the avant-garde.

BF: So when and why did *Film Culture* become more of a magazine about experimental film?

JM: Oh, I would say, by '65, when there were several other film publications in existence like *Film Quarterly* – founded by Ernest Callenbach – and *Film Comment*. These were dealing with the European art film and Hollywood. And I felt that in this context, the avant-garde did not have enough coverage, or very little coverage. All the new magazines gravitated immediately to social issues and Hollywood. So I began sort of trimming down the commercial cinema coverage in *Film Culture* until it was practically eliminated – but it never was, because we always had articles, essays, interviews even, dealing with Hollywood cinema.

BF: What was your relationship to Amos Vogel and Cinema 16?

JM: We were friends. My brother and I attended every single Cinema 16 program. It was one of our schools. And the relationship was always very friendly. We were in the same field. That is until January '62, when it became clear that Cinema 16 had lost touch with what was happening in the underground cinema. And it was not only Cinema 16: all the other distributors made fun of us, and did not want to distribute our films. So we felt that we had to create our own distribution center, which led to the creation of the Filmmakers Cooperative. Its roots really go back to '59, when we created the New American Cinema Group, and began our meetings and discussion of financing and distribution. We realized that some of the new works were not distributed at all, either because distributors felt they were badly made, were not interesting, or were just foolings around. They did not understand the changing techniques and changing styles, the new content and the new forms. They could not accept them. So we decided that it was time to start our own cooperative distribution/dissemination system. And Amos came to the first meeting, to the 'creating' meeting, in which there were like twenty filmmakers in attendance, and he tried

to talk us out of it. He did everything, and it didn't work. He said, "This will be a disaster, the field cannot afford two distribution centers." Everybody said, "Yeah, but you are not distributing our films. So there is no competition here." And of course we created the Cooperative. And there, since that moment, Amos took a position against me. He thought: "it's Jonas's clique, Jonas's invention, and it's destroying the field". And I would say his opposition went to extremes when in '64 I was arrested for screening *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, 1963) and a Genet (*Un Chant d'Amour*, 1950). Instead of supporting and fighting censorship, he attacked me in the *Village Voice*: "[*Flaming Creatures*] is a stupid, bad film, and why did he screen it?" More or less, it's good that I was arrested. It was absurd.

BF: How has the Co-op changed today, if at all?

JM: The way I see it, the Co-op has not changed drastically since those days, though it has expanded, which is because there is more demand. The outlets grew over the years. All the co-ops, like the Canyon Cinema Co-op in San Francisco, had to change the percentage of how much is needed to run the co-op and how much the filmmaker gets. For several years the percentage at the Filmmakers' Cooperative was 75 and 25. 25 percent of the income was kept to run the co-op. I don't know what the percentage is now, maybe 40 or 35.

BF: I think it's 50.

JM: It had to be increased to 50. Still, you know, it's a much better percentage than usual. It's like you get ten percent or nine – I don't know what exactly – from commercial distributors. And there is no proper accounting that you can really trust in commercial distribution. I remember what Shirley Clarke said about *The Cool World* (Clarke, 1963) and *The Connection* (Clarke, 1961). When she released them through a commercial distributor, they accounted for income of one million dollars or something. And Shirley did not get anything, because they proved to her that really, the film lost money. The difference is that, from the very beginning, the guiding principle of the Co-op was that it was to be run by the filmmakers – a model remains today. Also, that no one filmmaker is preferred against or above another; they're listed alphabetically in the catalog. Under Leslie Trumbull this was kept very strictly so. He never recommended any film. If anybody called and asked, "Can you suggest a program?," he sent them either to me or P. Adams Sitney, but he remained totally neutral. Unfortunately – I think it's unfortunate – that has changed now, and that's something I really disapprove of. The current Co-op directors prepare programs from their own head and they send them around the world, not what people are asking for. M.M. Serra suggests programming, her own choices. That means it's not neutral anymore. Sides are being taken, and certain filmmakers are being pushed above others. I hope that this policy will be changed someday back to the neutral and original principles. Because the way the Co-op was conceived was that one has to know what one wants. The same as when you go into a bookshop, you either take a chance – you open a book and read a few lines and buy it – or you come for a specific book. You come in and look for this or that author. The same in cinema. You have to know, or you take a chance. So it's no different at all.

BF: How did Anthology Film Archives come into existence?

JM: There are several reasons that Anthology was possible. The first one – of course, the most important – was that Jerome Hill, who was very supportive of the avant-garde, was offered a space at 425 Lafayette Street in the Shakespeare Theater, or the Public Theater. There was one end on the building that was still not completed. It was just an empty gutted out area. They said, "Well you want to do something with it?" The chairman of the Public Theater was his Army friend, Martinson of Martinson Coffee. So then Jerome called me and said, "Do you want to do something with that space?" And I said, "Why not?" Jerome said that he would sponsor construction of a movie theater in there. So at that point I contacted P. Adams Sitney and Kubelka, and we began making plans for a very special theater for that space. That was around late '67, early '68, when we began working. We opened to the public on December 1, 1970.

But there were other reasons. One was that some of my colleagues like Kubelka, Brakhage – less P. Adams – thought that the policy I followed in when I ran the Filmmakers' Cinémathèque was too open, too permissive. That I was showing, you know, some good work, but too much work that should never have been shown. Of course, as we look back now through the schedules of the Filmmakers Cinémathèque, I see that time was on my side. History was on my side, as people now recognize many of those films as important. But I thought, OK, if you think I am too permissive, why don't we... At that point George Maciunas was already starting the SoHo cooperative movement. 80 Wooster Street was the first co-operative building. Actually, he started with two buildings: one at 80 Wooster Street, and another on Greene Street next to Canal Street. So I took the ground floors of both of them, and Jerome Hill again helped with money. Actually that is what started SoHo. George's sister gave him some money, and then the Filmmakers' Cinémathèque, through Jerome Hill, put the first monies on the 80 Wooster Street building. Not on Greene Street yet. And that is what really started Soho.

BF: And that was in the early '60s?

JM: That was in the summer of '67. So I said, "Well, the Filmmakers' Cinémathèque will have two theaters. One will be totally open and permissive. The other one will be very selective, it will be like the Academy." And while I was working on this, Jerome came to me with a new idea: "I've got space over there [at the Public Theater]." So I abandoned Greene Street. I just kept 80 Wooster and continued screenings there while we were building at 425 Lafayette.

Then there was another reason. If you consider how many outlets there were in 1960-61, how many universities had film departments, you could count them on your two hands practically. But in 1970, when the American Film Institute published the first guide to the film courses offered by universities and colleges, there were about 23 or 24,000 different courses in cinema. Within one decade. Now, why did that happen? Because of the excitement about the independent cinema, I think. Filmmakers were traveling with their films, attacking every university, holding screenings. So now around '67 or '68 a demand was coming from all those universities, all those places; the students were asking for some examples of avant-garde, independent cinema. There was so much writing already on the underground, in the papers, and all this generated a wide need to show examples of independent, avant-garde, underground cinema beside the commercial cinema. And since many of those places were not in New York or San Francisco, but in various small towns

across the country, they had no chance to see any of these films, so how could they prepare programs? They kept calling P. Adams Sitney and myself, and we used to prepare programs for them. "Just call Jonas", they would say. "We have money for two programs. Prepare us two programs." Or, maybe just one program they would say. So we prepared these programs once and twice, and then ten, thirty times. Then we said, enough. And that was the reason. We said: why don't we create a little committee; we'll review the whole field and prepare a list, and when somebody calls from some school or university asking us to prepare programs for them, we'll send that list – the Essential Cinema collection. And we'll say, "You can choose anything from this list, every film on it has something important in it." And that's it. That will take care of it. So that was the beginning of the Essential Cinema collection. And we thought that that would be the main function of Anthology Film Archives, to just keep showing that repertory, and that's it. While at the Cinémathèque, on Wooster Street, we would show anything. And that is more or less how it was until '72 or '73.

At the very beginning I sort of expected, hoped, that P. Adams Sitney would run Anthology. But he could not cope with it. He resigned very early and I got stuck with it. And it became too much to run both the Cinémathèque and Anthology. So eventually I gave up the Cinémathèque. And it became again very complicated, because very soon we had to go into film preservation. When we began looking for the best possible prints, we discovered that nobody knew where the originals were, or they were falling to pieces. And then Martinson died before we even opened. And then two years later Jerome Hill died. And we had no more support. And you know it was quite expensive to run on Lafayette Street. When Jerome Hill died, the Avon Foundation – his foundation – refused to support us because they thought that Anthology and all that film that Jerome was so interested in was just a big mistake, and that they had to step in and correct that mistake by cutting off the support, phasing us out. So I decided that we had no way of surviving on Lafayette Street, we had to move to 80 Wooster. So in '74 we moved back to 80 Wooster, because that space was ours, and did not cost anything. It was very cheap to run, and there we could survive. And we survived.

BF: So at that point you melded Anthology and the Cinémathèque?

JM: Yes, we had to open ourselves up more. We first introduced a video department and held video screenings. It was run by Shigeko Kubota, Nam June Paik and Bob Harris. We had to open it to other, new works because we had no more money to purchase prints for the Essential Cinema collection or to continue that project, which froze. But the screenings did not freeze, they continued. It would have been silly to just keep showing the cinema that existed only before 1970. So I opened it to the new works. Then in '79 it became clear that the space was too small for us. There were various other problems. Other floors were taken by other people. There were families. And just above us there were always children running and throwing things. You could not show anything silent. We could not protect it from sound coming through the ceiling, no matter what we did. Plus, we needed a library and the film collection was expanding. That is when I decided to purchase the present building at 2nd Street and 2nd Avenue in an auction from the city. Of course, La Mama [an experimental theater group] wanted it. We had a very big fight. I had to mobilize a lot of support. And we managed to get the building. Again, thanks to Jerome Hill, who was already dead for a good five or six years. But he, in his will, left to Anthology a little piece

of land in Florida. So we sold that and we got 50,000 dollars, and with that 50,000 we bought the building. Thanks to Jerome Hill.

BF: How successfully do you think the Essential Cinema list has fulfilled its purpose?

JM: Very much so. Unfortunately, we could not continue to keep bringing it up to date. But what was done, what was selected by the time we abandoned the project, in '73-'74, the survey that we made of the avant-garde as it existed then – I don't think we made big mistakes. Some works were not included, and when you look back you say, "Why didn't they include that?" But the reason was that we planned to continue, to keep reviewing the field, and many of the films that were not included would have been included. But some maybe not. Anyway, the Essential Cinema list went to the universities, it went to all the learning institutions, and I think that it helped to establish the avant-garde as an important part of cinema. It was taken seriously. It's good I think that it was embraced, accepted by universities and museums and galleries. It helped a lot. So despite the fact that the project did not continue, still it did its work.

BF: So you originally intended to expand the list?

JM: The Essential Cinema Repertory was conceived as a continuous process of selecting and reviewing the field. We planned that the committee should meet always once a year and review the field. We all made suggestions about what we should re-see, include, and what different areas to cover. Not only independent and avant-garde but also commercial cinema. The priority however was the independents, the avant-garde. We postponed the rest of the field for the future.

BF: With the benefit of hindsight, to what extent do you think you could have included non-experimental genres and experimental films from the '80s and '90s without compromising its integrity?

JM: Maybe it was good that we did not have time to go into musicals, Douglas Sirk, Ford and *The Searchers*. Those films were discussed, and on the list. But maybe it was a lot to deal with. Maybe it was good that we did not continue. Because it would have dissipated the focus. Now the focus is on the avant-garde, and related works, like Eisenstein.

We bought the Archives building for 50,000 dollars, but by the time we opened we had spent 1.7 million to renovate it, to build the theaters, which we did mostly with loans from the banks. And we still owe the banks 300,000 dollars. We are still paying every month, 2 or 3 thousand dollars just in interest. So we are still burdened and we still have to build the library. But my dream is that someday we can create a little new contemporary committee and make up an Essential Cinema, part two. Because a lot of good work has been done during the last 30 years. There is so much new work done. And not only here, but also in France, in England, which is not seen at all. I think it's very important to have an Essential Cinema, part two.

BF: So, in relation to that, what do you think of the relationship between contemporary avant-garde filmmaking in America and beyond?

JM: We are talking of the cinema of the independent, as Annette [Michelson] would say, "avant-garde persuasion." I think until we really produce some kind of survey, consisting of maybe twenty to thirty programs from the last thirty years, it will be very difficult to have a perspective on what really has happened since the '70s. I mean, we know that some of the earlier filmmakers – Brakhage, Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Andrew Noren – continued to produce new, very important work since 1970-71. But there is a whole set of new, totally new names. And we see their films only rarely. It's difficult to gain a good perspective.

BF: What about experimental filmmaking outside the United States? What do you think the relationship between the two is?

JM: That's part of what I was saying. In France, there was a very strong movement during the same period, especially in the '70s. We had 8 programs we brought in 1980, and you could see that there was a lot happening. Yet, we don't know about it at all. And now they're presenting 80 programs of avant-garde films at the Cinémathèque Française and Beaubourg – it's still running probably, right now. And how many of those have we seen? Or in England. Between 1968 and '78 a lot happened. Of course, they don't know themselves how much happened. And now David Curtis and Malcolm LeGrice are organizing the first retrospective of British experimental films ... they got backing to organize something similar to the Essential Cinema, a British Essential Cinema Collection. So they will be able to see what really happened there. But a lot happened in other countries during the same period, and we are just beginning to see it now, because I think that the New York and San Francisco scenes were so active in the '60s and the '70s, that they had no energy to even get interested in what was happening in other countries. They were too much involved with themselves. Those movements in other countries escaped their attention. Movements in art and cinema like Lettrisme and the Situationists in France. Nobody practically even knew about them. "Lettrisme, hmm, yeah...". But there were films made. OK, one film, Isidore Isou's film [*Venom and Eternity*, 1950] was shown here, and actually had an impact on Brakhage and many other people. But that is about the only film from that period that was shown here. It was just Cocteau, Cocteau, Cocteau, Cocteau, and that's about it.

BF: In the past, especially in the early days of *Film Culture*, you wrote extensively on both studio films and independent features. To what extent are you still interested in that sort of filmmaking? Is that something you still follow at all?

JM: Unfortunately, I have no time. There are many films that I want to see, but I have no time. In the '60s, there were avant-garde shorts and avant-garde features. *Flaming Creatures* is not exactly a feature, but you could consider it one. The same as *Vigo*. Some of *Vigo*'s films are not exactly features in the way a feature is normally understood. But Ron Rice made *The Flower Thief* (1960) and *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963/1982). These are features, but they were also part of the avant-garde in their sensibility and in their techniques. Or David Brooks's film [*The Wind is Carrying Him Toward the Open Sea*, 1968], or *Narcissus* (1956) by Willard Maas, there were a whole bunch of them. Beginning with Shirley Clarke and [Lionel] Rogosin, a breed of independents developed that wanted to make a more public kind of feature. And their sensibility was different. The content was different, and they sort of moved away from the

avant-garde sensibility and techniques. But they still did not manage to gain a wide audience, and they slowly died out, practically. That whole generation of independent feature filmmakers from the '60s and '70s died before they could realize their dreams. Figures like Shirley Clarke, or Rogosin, Downey, or Adolfas. Adolfas could never get sponsorship, because his scripts required at least one million or two million dollars to produce.

BF: It seems like the people making independent features today...

JM: Now, they are just more or less in the kitchen of Hollywood. They are Hollywood. If they are different in any way it's only that their budgets will not allow them to be as slick as Hollywood. In their themes and subject they don't differ that much. Of course they differ, but not essentially.

BF: I would like to talk about some of your own films as well. You said that you started shooting film shortly after you came to the United States, and I'm wondering at what point you started making your film diaries, and also at what point you realized that that was the format you would continue to work in?

JM: My first scripts were semi-avant-garde documentaries and narratives. I wrote them together with my brother. And I actually sent them to Flaherty but he said, "Nobody wants to sponsor my own films, how can I help you?" So I gave up very early on that, and just continued filming, collecting footage, trying to master my Bolex. But as time went, I began reviewing my footage occasionally. I began seeing that it was like I was keeping a notebook of my life in New York. Actually, I should say something here about my practice of reviewing – re-seeing all my footage practically once a year or so as time went on. Because I kept on reviewing my footage, even the Ektachrome – which is already 25 years old and even more – still has good color. I think that airing the film is beneficial – that's what Langlois always said, to expose film to air. All the museums around the world, when they have nitrate they just keep it locked up. They don't touch, they don't screen nitrate. But Langlois screened. Films like to be screened, he used to say. And his nitrate prints are in better condition, because they were aired. The chemicals evaporate. The film needs to be aired. Same with magnetic tape. When the chemicals just sit they begin to eat, to destroy the film. In any case, by 1965, somewhere around there, it was very clear to me what I was doing. I became more conscious of a notebook, diary form. But I did not release anything. I kept looking at my footage, but did not finish anything until an occasion came in '67, when Gerald O'Grady got some money for some kind of festival in Buffalo, and he wanted to include film. It was music, theater, etc. He asked me if I would show some of my film diary. And that's when I put together *Walden*.

BF: When you make your films, how do you work with the material? Are they really heavily constructed or do you tend to work with big blocks?

JM: When I begin to work in the editing room, my method is elimination. I begin to eliminate until what's left is just what I want it to be. Then I begin to change the order, or trim something here and there. Some people have said that I'm careless, random, anything goes. The truth is that what stays in – every frame – is approved by me. The seeming randomness of my filmmaking is actually very deceiving. Because what I film is very

precisely determined, chosen by my memory and intuition. And in the editing room it all goes through the Procrustean bed of my editing method. In short: I control absolutely every frame of my film.

BF: I wonder how you feel about the relationship between your films and a lot of the films that you've been supportive of over the years, like the American avant-garde in general?

JM: My taste in films is the same as in music, or in literature. I cannot reduce myself to one or two or three names. I am interested in all of the different forms, which give me pleasure and inspire me and keep me alive. So that's why I embrace a very wide variety of cinema. I like John Ford, and I like Stan Brakhage and Marie Menken, Barbara Rubin, Jack Smith, Harry Smith. And John Smith, whom I have not seen yet, but I hear everybody says he is very good.

BF: Well, one of the reasons I ask is because your films seem to have a quality or themes to them that are uncharacteristic of American films. For example, this theme of exile...

JM: Yes, well, because I happen to be an exile, while Americans in general, they are not exiles. They are not even immigrants, those who make films. They grew up here. So that theme does not really exist for them. But I cannot avoid it. One thing I was thinking the other day about the terms: I think that I have not seen anywhere recently what we call avant-garde, experimental referred to as oppositional cinema. I think that the dynamics, what made the '60s so exciting was that oppositional aspect. In the same way I would say that bohemia is an oppositional way of life, as compared to the rest of society. This duality is always needed, it produces a dynamic; energy is created. The independent, the avant-garde cinema is the opposition to Hollywood cinema. If you eliminate the oppositional cinema, the same as if you eliminate bohemia, cinema would become dead. A certain energy would go out. And there are little periods in various countries where that oppositional cinema disappears. In Italy, there was one in the '60s, for three or four years. They even had a filmmakers' cooperative there. And then it sort of disappeared. In Germany, also, there was one, and it disappeared. Somehow, in the United States, there was and still is, the oppositional cinema. It managed to keep alive, though it seems sometimes like there are three or four years where it falls asleep. But then it picks itself up again. I think we are in a good period now. There is an oppositional cinema.

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