

P R O F I L E S

ALL POCKETS OPEN

ONE rainy spring afternoon in 1967, Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney were standing under a canopy on Lexington Avenue discussing their summer plans. Mekas was going to take a number of American underground films on a tour of European cities, starting in June. Sitney, a Yale senior and a film theorist, would come over later to relieve him, and they were trying to decide where they should meet. On an impulse, Mekas suggested the Spanish town of Ávila, birthplace of St. Theresa, whose autobiography he had recently been reading. "The moment I said the word 'Ávila,'" Mekas recalls, "two fresh roses appeared on the sidewalk at our feet. They just *appeared* there, and the next moment an old man—a bum—also appeared, as though out of nowhere, picked up the roses, and placed them on the steps of a church next door, saying, 'These belong here.'" Mekas and Sitney decided on the spot to adopt St. Theresa as the patron saint of the underground cinema. "From then on, whenever problems began to seem overwhelming, we called on her for help," Mekas says. "And it always seemed to work—except for getting a license from the city to show our films. Even St. Theresa couldn't quite manage that."

Careful hagiologists will surely point out that Mekas seems to have got his saints mixed—it is St. Theresa of Lisieux (1873-97) who manifests her presence with roses, not St. Theresa of Ávila (1515-82). But for Mekas, who is himself often referred to as the patron saint of the underground cinema, it must have been a relief to shift the burden of sanctity a bit. Being a saint has its drawbacks, and there have been many times when Mekas has wished he could get out from under the demands and frustrations of his role as standard-bearer for the New American Cinema—which he named and whose leading champion, polemicist, and organizer he has been for the last ten years—so that he could devote more time to his own filmmaking. For Mekas is a filmmaker, too, and one whose work is increasingly admired by his peers in the movement. In "Diaries, Notes, and Sketches," finished in 1969, and in the more recent "Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania," Mekas, now fifty years old, has achieved what many of his colleagues regard as a breakthrough into a new form—a



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Jonas Mekas

highly personal, idiosyncratic film diary that may well become one of the more influential styles of the seventies. "His Lithuania film brought something really fresh and new," Ken Jacobs, a leading film innovator of the sixties, said the other day. "Now Jonas has to be thought of as a major artist, in addition to everything else he's done."

Underground, or experimental, or independent cinema—nobody really likes any of the terms applied to it—is, roughly speaking, the cinema that exists outside commercial distribution channels, and it consists of films of various lengths whose distinguishing characteristic is that their authors look upon them as works of art rather than sources of entertainment. The underground cinema has taken many forms during the last decade. Some of the films have been notable primarily for their subject matter, which in certain cases—perhaps because underground

filmmakers usually lack funds and have to make do with what's nearest at hand—has featured male and female nudity and rather variegated sex. Although it is undoubtedly true that the underground cinema served as a sort of distant early warning of the sexual revolution in other areas, the widespread tendency to view the movement as virtually synonymous with pornography is far from accurate. The fact is that the underground's most significant achievements have very little to do with subject matter; they reflect, rather, a thorough reinvestigation and opening up of the film medium itself. The largely abstract collage films of Robert Breer; the animations of Stan VanDerBeek and Harry Smith; the "direct-cinema" documentaries of Richard Leacock, Don Pennebaker, and David and Albert Maysles; the incredibly complex image-making of Stan Brakhage and Peter Kubelka; and the new "structural" films of Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Ken Jacobs, and others have all been concerned at some level with the visual nature of film and the nature of seeing. In their concentration on materials and processes, rather than on content, these filmmakers have taken the path of contemporary artists in other fields, and parallels between their work and recent art history are often noted. Brakhage's camera, which becomes an extension of his own emotions and sensibilities, is frequently compared to the Action painting of Jackson Pollock. Structural cinema seems clearly related to Minimal Art, and presents many of the same difficulties for the uninitiated viewer. Peter Kubelka, who is Austrian, and Tony Conrad, who is not, have both made movies reduced to the four basic elements of cinema—light, darkness, sound, silence—which is rather a long way from pornography (Conrad's film "The Flicker" reportedly can cause an epileptic seizure in one out of every fifteen thousand viewers), and some West Coast devotees of "expanded cinema" are currently working with computers, videotape, and other techniques that do away entirely with such old-fashioned matters as film and movie cameras.

Most of these developments go more or less unnoticed by the average movie critic, who has all he can do to keep up with commercial films, and the critics who do pay regular attention to the underground are not overly admiring

of its works. Andrew Sarris, who writes film criticism for the *Village Voice* and other organs, differs sharply with his old friend and fellow *Voice* columnist Mekas on the underground's importance. "I find the commercial cinema more adventurous today than the underground," Sarris said recently. "Film is *not* just a visual medium. Take away narrative and psychological interest, and what do you have? Simply an optical experience, which to my mind isn't enough. Besides which there is the time element to consider. Films can't function in the same sense as painting or sculpture, because the viewing experience is entirely different—ten minutes of experimental-film viewing can begin to seem pretty agonizing." To Mekas and his colleagues, this sort of simply indicates the blindness of Established Movie Critics.



Whatever their feelings about the underground, though, critics and filmmakers agree that its development and spectacular growth since 1960 are due in large part to the efforts of Jonas Mekas. Stan Brakhage, whom Mekas considers the most important filmmaker in America, states flatly that without Mekas's help and encouragement at least a third of his films would never have been made, and many other filmmakers could say the same thing. "Jonas has many pockets," Brakhage said recently, "and all of them are open." Mekas has tirelessly championed the cause of the independent filmmaker in his weekly column in the *Village Voice*, in the more abstruse pages of *Film Culture*, the somewhat irregular journal that he founded in 1955 and still edits, and through every other public and private channel he has been able to find. He has kept many a filmmaker going with timely sums of money raised by one means or another (out of thin air, it often seemed), while his own film projects often went begging. His long struggle to establish a permanent showcase in New York where independent filmmakers could screen their work has brought him into bitter conflict with censors, police, and city licensing authorities—the bitterest being his arrest in 1964 on the charge of showing an obscene film (Jack Smith's "Flaming Creatures"), which resulted in a six-month suspended jail sentence. And it is thanks in large part to Mekas that the underground cinema is no longer underground. In 1962, he served as midwife to the Film-Makers' Cooperative, a library and a distribution agency for avant-garde films, now situated at 175 Lexington Avenue; today

the organization has four hundred and fifty active members, only a few of whom make a living from rentals paid for their films. Similar co-operatives, modelled on the New York original, have been established in other cities, from San Francisco to Ann Arbor. In every case, the major audience for their films is found in colleges and universities, hundreds of which now offer credit courses in film history or technique, and fifty-one of which offer degrees in film. It is often enough remarked that the undergraduates who in former times might have been writing poems or novels are now making films, but the movement seems to have survived even this. Mekas's current activity is serving as director (with P. Adams Sitney as assistant director) of Anthology Film Archives, which its founders describe as "the first film museum exclusively devoted to the film as an art." In an austere designed ninety-seat theatre in the old Astor Library building, on Lafayette Street, students, filmmakers, and other acolytes of the new cinema sit in hushed silence to watch what Anthology's film-selection committee (two of whose five members happen to be Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney) considers to be the "essential" films in the history of the medium—from the pioneer experiments of the Lumières and Méliès, through the masterworks of Griffith, von Stroheim, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dreyer, Bresson, and other narrative-film directors, up to the generally plotless film poems of Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, and, for that matter, Jonas Mekas.

"REMINISCENCES OF A JOURNEY TO LITHUANIA," Mekas's diary film, was shown at the New York Film Festival last fall. It records the visit that Mekas and his younger brother, Adolfas, made in the summer of 1971 to the Lithuanian village of Semeniskiai, where they were born and brought up, and which they had not seen since they left it, twenty-seven years before. Adolfas, who is also a filmmaker, naturally brought back his own cinematic record of the trip, and it was shown together with Jonas's at the Film Festival. Although many of the same scenes, people, and incidents occur in both accounts, the two films could hardly have seemed more dissimilar in tone and feeling. Adolfas's, like most of his work, is a comedy, full of visual jokes shot in a more or less traditional manner. Jonas's, by contrast, is shot and edited in the jumpy, staccato, yet

oddly lyrical style that marks his earlier "Diaries, Notes, and Sketches" and that serves uncannily to suggest his own personality: the camera is in constant motion, darting here and there, noticing every sort of detail, sometimes deliberately out of focus, often at frame-by-frame speeds that telescope minutes of action into quick-flashing, almost subliminal images. At first, it is difficult to look at the film; the demands made on the eye are dizzying. But after twenty minutes or so one grows accustomed to the camera movement and begins to accept it as a legitimately expressive, personal style. We are seeing Semeniskiai through Jonas Mekas's eyes—seeing the tiny farm village and the fields of his youth, the farmhouse in which he grew up, his eighty-seven-year-old mother (still drawing water from the well, cooking, picking berries, digging potatoes), the three brothers and one sister who never left Lithuania, the uncle who advised Jonas and Adolfas to "go West and see the world," and, occasionally, Jonas himself, a lean, ascetic-looking man with a self-mocking smile and alert eyes. Much of the time, the sound track is synchronized with the scenes being shown. There is a lot of singing—Mekas remarks at one point, "Whenever more than one Lithuanian get together, they sing"—and the sweet, mournful folk songs become one of the themes of the film. From time to time, Mekas's voice is heard "over," commenting and reflecting on these scenes. The voice is quiet and halting (Mekas still speaks English with a strong accent), and the undertone is profoundly nostalgic. According to Adolfas, the trip was an intensely emotional experience for his brother, who broke down and wept several times when he was called on to say something before a gathering. Adolfas, three years younger than Jonas and completely at home in America, apparently was not subject to the same emotions. But for Jonas the trip seemed to confirm his long-standing suspicion that he has not yet found any place of his own in the world.

Semeniskiai, which is in northeastern Lithuania, not far from the Latvian border, had about twenty families living in it when Mekas (the family name is pronounced "Meckas") was born there in 1922, and the population has grown only slightly since then. The nearest town, Birzai, is sixteen miles away. Like their three older brothers before them, Jonas and Adolfas worked in the fields and took care of the livestock from May to October. Some years, they were needed all winter on the farm, too, and had to stay out of

school. By the time Jonas graduated from the local grade school and went off to attend the *Gymnasium* in Birzai, he was seventeen, and the school authorities told him that he was too old to enroll in the first-year class. Instead of going home, he spent the winter in Birzai tutoring himself, made up five years' schoolwork in five months, and the following spring passed the entrance examinations for the sixth-year class. That was in 1940, the year the Red Army crossed the border and proclaimed Lithuania a Soviet Socialist Republic. By the time Jonas graduated from the *Gymnasium*, in 1942, the Russians had been driven out and the country was under German occupation.

Mekas's interests had always been literary. He read everything he could get his hands on, and he wrote poetry and fiery critical articles on literary subjects. All five Mekas brothers wrote poetry, as a matter of fact—a family trait that Adolfas attributes to their mother's delightful habit of improvising songs all day while she went about her household duties—but Jonas was obviously the most talented, and his published poems soon attracted attention in literary circles. After graduating from the *Gymnasium*, he took a job as literary editor of Birzai's weekly newspaper. Early in January, 1943, he moved to the larger town of Panevezys, to become assistant editor of a literary weekly there. He and Adolfas also started publishing a clandestine anti-Nazi newspaper, cutting the stencils on an old typewriter, which they hid in a woodshed near the family home in Semeniskiai. One day, the typewriter was stolen. The Mekas brothers realized that it would turn up sooner or later, and that the police would have no trouble tracing it to them. At the time, bands of anti-Nazi partisans were operating in the woods near Semeniskiai, but nobody in the family thought that Jonas could go into hiding with them. "Jonas was always the weak brother, the sickly one," Adolfas recalls. "As a child, he wasn't expected to live." For years, their parents feared that Jonas might

be tubercular, and Jonas (after narrowly escaping one German Army recruiting patrol by putting on women's clothes) had bribed a local doctor to sign a certificate stating that he indeed did have t.b. and was unfit for military service. The boys' uncle counselled them to go West. He was the Protestant pastor of Birzai and also something of an intellectual—he had been educated in Switzerland, knew Oswald Spengler, and owned a library that gave Jonas his real education. The pastor even managed to secure forged papers for the boys, giving them permission to study at the University of Vienna. They left Semeniskiai one night in July, 1944. The train they boarded was supposed to go to Vienna, but somewhere along the route it was attached to a train carrying Russian and Polish war prisoners to German slave-labor camps. The Mekas brothers ended up in a labor camp at Elmshorn, a suburb of Hamburg, where their forged papers were of no help whatever.

After seven months in the Elmshorn camp, they decided to make a break for it. Hamburg was under constant Allied bombing at the time, and the German armies were in retreat on all fronts. Taking advantage of the general confusion, Jonas and Adolfas simply walked out of camp one night and headed north. Their plan was to cross into Denmark and then take a boat to Sweden, and they nearly made it. At the Danish border, though, they were caught by the German military police and thrown into a train headed back to Hamburg. They escaped again before the train moved out, and managed to jump into a truck full of war refugees. That evening, local farmers came into the refugee camp looking for experienced farm workers, and the Mekas brothers volunteered. They were hired on the spot by a German couple who lived near Flensburg and who needed help so badly—all the local men being away in the Army—that no questions were ever asked. "We stayed there long enough to do the spring sowing," Jonas says. "We didn't know the war had ended until two weeks afterward."

For the next five years, Jonas and Adolfas were displaced persons. They lived in D.P. camps in southern Germany and went to college—to Johannes Gutenberg University, in Mainz, and later to the University of Tübingen—taking philosophy and literature courses free of charge, under the auspices of UNESCO. Jonas also edited a Lithuanian literary magazine called *Zvilgsniai* (*Glimpses*), which

was devoted to the work of refugees like him, and he managed to write and publish five books of his own during this period—two collections of fairy

tales, two of short stories, and his first volume of poems, "The Idylls of Semeniskiai." He wrote only in Lithuanian. The poems are so deeply rooted in the particular texture of this language (one of the oldest of the Indo-European family, with no Slavic roots) that Mekas does not believe they could be translated into English. A Lithuanian critic has described them as having little in common with most pastoral verse: "They show instead a hard country landscape, whose beauty is an expression of the courage and patience of the people who live in it." Jonas thought of himself primarily as a poet; Adolfas hoped to write for the stage. Both brothers had been strongly influenced, however, by a book called "Dramaturgy of Film," which Jonas found in a bookshop in Heidelberg once when they went there to hear Karl Jaspers lecture. "It was not a great book, but after reading it we both started writing film scripts," Jonas has said. "The fact was we felt lost in those D.P. camps, where hardly anybody spoke our language. When I read that book, I realized that cinema was the tongue in which we could reach everybody."

By 1949, the camps were starting to close down. The Mekas brothers had no desire to go back behind the Iron Curtain, but neither were they eager to emigrate to the United States. America's image was already somewhat tarnished in European intellectual circles, and several D.P. friends of theirs who had gone to the States had sent back unfavorable reports. The Mekases' first idea was to go to Israel and start a film industry. "We'd had a romantic education," Adolfas has said. "We remembered Byron, and we thought, 'Here is a new nation—we'll go and help build it!'" But Israel had no quota for non-Jewish Lithuanians, and they were turned down by the immigration authorities. Their next thought was to go to Egypt and *walk* to Israel, but the Egyptians turned them down, too. Then, as they were weighing the relative merits of becoming merchant seamen or Canadian woodcutters, they were unexpectedly provided with papers and passage to Chicago, arranged for them through the International Refugee Organization by a former D.P. who had emigrated a few months before. They sailed from Hamburg the following week, and landed in New York on a cold, gray November morning in

1949.

"We went to Times Square that evening," Jonas wrote in his diary. "I will never forget the impact which hit us upon emerging from the subway, right smack into the very middle of a sea of Neon Lights. And in the middle of the sky, there was the moon. But I wasn't sure if it was real or 'not. . . . The moon had no longer a reality of its own; it was a prop in a huge set of New York." Instead of taking a train to Chicago (where their friend, as they learned some years later, had arranged for them to work in a bakery), they took the subway to Brooklyn. Some other friends from the D.P. camps put them up until they found a room of their own, on South Third Street, in the Williamsburg section, on the block where Henry Miller once lived.

IT took the Mekas brothers nearly a year to master English. "Before we came, I could read Hemingway with the help of a dictionary," Adolfas recalls, "but when we got here I found out that people don't speak that way." Life in the D.P. camps had given them practical experience in a number of trades, though, and they had no trouble finding jobs. Jonas worked in factories, in a plumbing-supply company, and on the docks; he ironed clothes in a tailor shop and got to know Manhattan as a messenger for the Graphic photography studios, on West Twenty-second Street. Adolfas's first job was in a small shop making plastic wallets—he was paid twelve dollars for a twelve-hour day. Both brothers had kept diaries since they were children, and they continued to do so—in English, to help them learn the language. They also continued writing poetry and fiction. But filmmaking was rapidly becoming the master passion of both of them. Within three weeks of their arrival, Jonas had borrowed three hundred dollars, bought a 16-mm. Bolex, and begun shooting footage for a documentary on the Williamsburg section, some of which appears in the introductory scenes of his "Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania." They took jobs that would let them off in time to attend the five-thirty screenings at the Museum of Modern Art, and they went as often as possible to the New York Film Society, in Greenwich Village, where they had seen "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" on their second evening in New York. From 1950 on, Jonas was also a habitu  of Cinema 16, the film society whose programs, given in a succession of theatres from 1947 to 1963, were

then the main outlet for avant-garde and experimental films of all kinds.

What came to be known as the second film avant-garde was in full flower at that time. The first avant-garde, which had emerged in Paris during the nineteen-twenties and gave birth to such works as Jean Cocteau's "The Blood of a Poet," Luis Bu uel's and Salvador Dal 's "An Andalusian Dog," and the Ren  Clair-Francis Picabia "Entr'acte," had guttered out during the Depression. The development of highly versatile 16-mm. film equipment during the Second World War helped to launch a new wave of American independents, first on the West Coast and later in New York. The goddess and catalyst of this second avant-garde was Maya Deren, a Russian-born, Smith College-educated girl, whose fourteen-minute film "Meshes of the Afternoon," while echoing to some extent the psychological Surrealism of the pre-1930 European avant-garde, nevertheless struck a new, personal, and poetic note. Maya Deren had returned to New York from Los Angeles in the mid-forties and made herself the center of a group of independent filmmakers, who would meet—along with free spirits from the other arts—at her apartment, on Morton Street. She also wrote and lectured, organized screenings in New York and elsewhere, proselytized college and university students, and established a Creative Film Foundation, to help promising talents get their films shot and printed. She was, in addition, a beautiful woman and a student of voodoo, who had learned in Haiti to perform certain magic rites. Willard Maas, a fellow-filmmaker, claimed that she once invoked her occult powers while he was shooting a film and caused the entire production to collapse in ruins.

Jonas Mekas had reservations about the films of Maya Deren, along with those of Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, and other luminaries of the second avant-garde. His own inclinations then were still largely those of a postwar European in-

tellectual: he admired the neorealism of Rossellini and De Sica, read Camus, and took part, along with Julian Beck and Judith Malina and others, in the earliest protest demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Too many of the avant-garde films of that period struck him as outdated, watered-down versions of European Surrealism. Mekas made a film in which he parodied the various avant-garde styles, but he didn't like the results, and it has never been shown. In 1955, though, in the third issue of *Film Culture*, which he had founded earlier in the year, he gave vent to his adverse opinions in an article called "The Experimental Film in America."

It is typical of Mekas that he has never tried to explain away the arguments he advanced in this article, most of which he later recanted entirely. In it he said that the majority of avant-garde films not only "suffer from a markedly adolescent character" but are "shallow and incomprehensible," lacking in artistic discipline, narrow in range, repetitious, poorly photographed, loosely constructed, devoid of any moral dimension, and seriously marred by "the conspiracy of homosexuality that is becoming one of the most persistent and most shocking characteristics of American film poetry today." The article, understandably, caused a stir. Willard Maas spat in Mekas's face at the premiere of Maas's new film, "Narcissus." Maya Deren called up Stan Brakhage—of whose work Mekas had written that it "seems to be the best expression of all the virtues and sins of the American film poem today"—and said that they should sue. She thought that the article was libelous, and felt sure they would be able to clear enough in damages to pay their filming costs for a year or so—the publisher of *Film Culture*, she reasoned, must have access to considerable financial backing.

Film Culture's backing at that point, and for many years thereafter, was actually no more substantial than Jonas's weekly salary at the Graphic studios. The Mekas brothers, who had moved from Brooklyn to a fifteen-dollar-a-month apartment on Orchard Street, on Manhattan's lower East Side, had rounded up a list of filmmakers and their friends as "sponsors" of the new journal, to be published "every two months for the advancement of a more profound understanding of the aesthetic and social aspects of the motion pictures," but none of the sponsors had much money to dispense, and in order to print the first issue the

Mekases enlisted the good will of a Lithuanian branch of the Franciscan Brothers in Brooklyn, who ran their own printing shop. The first issue appeared in January, 1955, with a picture of Orson Welles on its cover. Its appearance was celebrated by a party at the Waldorf-Astoria, which a friend in the Foreign Press Association had managed to arrange at no cost to the Mekases. But there was no money afterward to pay the Franciscan Brothers, and a different printer had to be found for the second issue. The Mekases couldn't pay him, either. While they were preparing the third issue, undaunted by the threat of lawsuits by their creditors, Harry Gantt showed up. Harry Gantt was a free lance in the magazine-publishing business who had an interest in the arts. "He just came around one day and said he believed in what we were doing, and asked us to let him handle our printing," Adolfas says. "Harry has handled it ever since, although he's never made any money out of us. It used to cost about twelve or fifteen hundred dollars to put out an issue, and there were never enough subscriptions or ads, and a lot of our own money went into it. Sometimes Harry would carry us for four or five issues—up to ten thousand dollars. He's been the savior of us all."

As *Film Culture* evolved from a bimonthly to a monthly to the "unperiodical" that it is today (there was once an interval of almost two years between issues), its content and point of view also changed. The early issues dealt with cinema in general—European and American commercial films as well as the avant-garde—and the intellectual tone of the magazine was determined largely by Mekas's friend Edouard de Laurot, a heavy thinker and a Marxist critic. "During the early fifties, I was very much influenced by the rather doctrinaire Marxism of de Laurot," Mekas said recently. "But then I decided that there were too many people attacking the independent filmmaker and that I would take the defender's position." Willard Maas, Maya Deren, and the others welcomed his conversion. They had even greater reason to welcome it in the fall of 1958, when Mekas began his weekly movie column in the *Village Voice*. The *Voice* was only three years old at the time. It had been running an occasional piece on film, and one day Mekas, who was then writing a monthly movie review for a little magazine called *Intro Bulletin*, went in to see Jerry Tallmer, the *Voice's* associate editor, and asked why the paper didn't

have a regular film column. Tallmer said, "Nobody wants to write it. Why don't you?" Mekas's first column appeared in the next issue.

From the outset, his column was called "Movie Journal," and a journal is what it has most closely resembled—opinionated and not infrequently didactic. The Mekas column has delighted some readers, infuriated others, and drawn more mail—most of it unfavorable—than any other department in the *Voice*. Readers have attacked Mekas's "flabbergastingly irresponsible reviews," his "truly monumental vulgarity," his "new depths of pretentiousness." One of them accused him of never liking "ANY movie that cost over \$6.37 to produce." Maya Deren, now a close friend, wrote in to say that "even when Mekas is wrong he is wrong about the right things and for the right reasons." For the first year or so, Mekas tried to deal with Hollywood films and foreign films as well as the \$6.37 avant-garde, but this was clearly impossible; accordingly, in 1960, he prevailed on Tallmer to hire Andrew Sarris, a young contributor to *Film Culture*, who eventually took over the reviewing of the commercial films, while Mekas turned all his own energy and attention to what he was now calling the New American Cinema. As it happened, two recent independent films had given Mekas great hope for the future. John Cassavetes' "Shadows," shot in New York in 1958 for fifteen thousand dollars, with much of its action and dialogue improvised by Cassavetes and the actors, seemed to Mekas a real breakthrough into a new area of narrative filmmaking. The second film was entirely different—a plotless, absurd, often hilarious spoof that was the first cinematic realization of the Beat spirit. Called "Pull My Daisy," it was made in the spring of 1959 by a friend of Jack Kerouac's named Alfred Leslie and a Swiss photographer named Robert Frank. Its action, such as it is, takes place in Leslie's loft, and the cast consists of Leslie's and Kerouac's friends—Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, David Amram, Peter Orlovsky, Larry Rivers, Richard Bellamy, and the professional actress Delphine Seyrig, who would be seen to somewhat better advantage two years later in Alain Resnais's "Last Year at Marienbad." In 1959, *Film Culture's* first annual Independent Film Award went to "Shadows," and in 1960 its second went to "Pull My Daisy." The latter film, Mekas wrote in the *Voice*, pointed new directions—"new ways out of the frozen officialdom and midcentury senility

of our arts, toward new themes, a new sensibility."

In the summer of 1960, having scraped together enough money to buy some out-of-date film stock, Mekas and de Laurot themselves began work on a feature-length film, from a script by Mekas, called "Guns of the Trees." Mekas described the film as an "attempt to portray the inside of a generation, its subtle feelings, thoughts, and attitudes." There is no plot to speak of. The generation is summarized by two urban couples, one of them white, middle-class, and weighed down by thoughts of suicide (played by Adolfas Mekas and Frances Stillman, Jonas's girlfriend at the time), the other black, poor, and better adjusted (played by Ben Carruthers, the star of "Shadows," and Argus Juillard, Carruthers' girlfriend). A good many scenes take place on the bleak outskirts of the city, and there is a lot of wordless staring into space. At intervals, the sound track is taken over by Allen Ginsberg reading his own poems. The film lasts an hour and a quarter, and it is pretty heavy going.

Its somewhat sepulchral tone may be due in part to the ordeal involved in making it. The Mekas brothers, who had moved from Orchard Street to West 109th Street and then downtown again, to East Thirteenth Street, were living during this period on about thirty cents a day. They ate rice, tea, and lard, plus an occasional potato stolen from the local Safeway market. Relief arrived of the most unexpected sort—tinned pâté, caviar, truffles, boar's tongue, and the like. A fellow-Lithuanian named George Maciunas, who had gone into the fancy-food importing business, was passing on his samples. But cash was desperately short. Every spare penny went into buying film. Sheldon Rochlin, the cameraman, by agreeing to cut his hair got his father to buy a five-hundred-dollar participation. The equipment kept breaking down, and the filmmakers kept being evicted by irate property owners just as they were about to shoot a scene. "It's unbelievable what we went through," Adolfas recalled not long ago. "We were arrested three times for filming without a permit." Mekas himself was never happy about the finished film. He regretted having made de Laurot its assistant director, because de Laurot's ideas turned out to be entirely opposed to his. De Laurot wanted to direct the actors at every turn, while Mekas sought to draw from them the spontaneous "truth" of their own reactions. Many scenes were nev-

er shot, because they would have cost too much. "It's very clear by now, the whole film is a failure," Mekas wrote in his diary during the final editing, in April, 1961. "Guns of the Trees" nevertheless won the first prize at the Second International Free Cinema Festival at Porretta Terme, Italy, in 1962, edging out other entries from sixteen countries (among them Truffaut's "Jules and Jim"), and it was shown commercially here and abroad.

For Mekas and the twenty or thirty other independent filmmakers in New York at this time, the big problem was distribution. Most of them had had their films shown and distributed in the past by Cinema 16, the very successful film society formed in 1947 by Amos and Marcia Vogel. Cinema 16 handled a wide variety of films—educational, political, foreign, avant-garde—which were shown at weekly screenings in a succession of theatres and were also available for rent. For years, it had been virtually the only outlet for the avant-garde filmmaker. Vogel exercised his own aesthetic judgment as to which avant-garde films he would handle, though, and the independents—nearly all of whom were (and still are) both chronically broke and unshakably convinced of their talent—tended to chafe at this. In 1961, Vogel's decision not to screen a film by Stan Brakhage called "Anticipation of the Night" brought on a crisis. Although Cinema 16 had shown practically all of Brakhage's previous films, "Anticipation of the Night"—an attempt to visualize the world as it might look through the eyes of a newborn baby—struck Vogel as an artistic failure. He did accept it for distribution through Cinema 16's rental service, but he declined to inflict what he considered bad art on an audience, and soon afterward, largely as a result of this refusal, Mekas and a number of his colleagues decided to form their own distribution agency. This was the beginning of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, which was formally established early in 1962.

Looking back on the schism, Vogel thinks that Mekas simply used the Brakhage issue as a means to his own ends. "I had known Jonas for years," Vogel said last spring. "My wife always used to let him in free to Cinema 16 screenings, because he had no money and was so obviously in love with film. But there are really two Jonases—one very dedicated, the other a Machiavelian maneuverer, a history rewriter, an attempted pope. He has two passions:

film and power. His greatest talent is to make people—some people—believe that he is what he is not." Cinema 16 went out of business in 1963, partly because of television and rising business costs and partly, one can assume, because of the Film-Makers' Cooperative. Vogel went on to become co-founder (with Richard Roud) and director of the New York Film Festival, but relations between him and Mekas have been rather strained for some time.

The basic policy of the Film-Makers' Cooperative was that no film would be rejected, for any reason. While Cinema 16 had been oriented at least partway toward its audience, the Coop intended to serve no one but the filmmaker. Anybody who had ever made a film could send it in and have it listed in the Cooperative's catalogue, for rental at a fee set by the filmmaker. The arrangement was nonexclusive: no contracts were involved, and filmmakers were encouraged to seek out additional means of distribution as well. The rental income went directly to the filmmaker, minus twenty-five per cent taken out to help pay the Cooperative's operating costs. The Cooperative distributed films to art theatres, film societies, universities, and other outlets, and started regular weekly screenings of Cooperative members' films at the Charles Theatre, at Twelfth Street and Avenue B, around the corner from the Mekas apartment. Although decisions were nominally in the hands of a seven-man board of directors, the galvanizing figure and principal architect of all these activities was Mekas, who spent most of his time at the Cooperative's small, cluttered, fourth-floor office at 414 Park Avenue South. By then, he had quit his job at the Graphic studios (where he had risen from messenger boy to darkroom technician), and was getting along on his ten-dollar-per-column salary at the *Village Voice*, plus eighteen dollars a week for two days' work at an offset-printing studio. Neither then nor later did he get any salary from the Film-Makers' Cooperative, which was chronically short of cash anyway.

The Cooperative's first catalogue listed twenty-seven filmmakers in various categories, and fifty-six films, covering almost every aspect of the avant-garde cinema, that were available for rental. Some were quite literally "home movies," made by amateurs who had little more to offer than their own unfocused egos. The Cooperative refused

on principle to provide any sort of guidance for its customers, who were thus obliged to rely on brief and often fanciful catalogue descriptions sent in with each film by its maker. At the Charles Theatre, devotees grew accustomed to sitting through two hours of relative misery for every ten minutes of filmic revelation. Mekas's rigidly non-selective policy alienated more than a few viewers, but Mekas, who sometimes appeared to like everything he saw, remained unshakably convinced that only in such an uncritical climate could the tender shoots of the new film art find sustenance. Cinema was learning to talk a new language, as he never tired of informing his readers in the *Voice*, and these early babblings were a necessary part of the process. "Even the mistakes, the out-of-focus shots, the shaky shots, the unsure steps, the hesitant movements, the overexposed and underexposed bits are part of the vocabulary," he wrote. "The doors to the spontaneous are opening; the foul air of stale and respectable professionalism is oozing out." Before the Cooperative was a year old, however, some of its more established members had started to drift away. These erosions were offset to some extent by the success of Adolfas Mekas's film "Hallelujah the Hills," a spirited feature-length comedy that both Mekas brothers worked on through much of 1963.

Directed by Adolfas from his own script, and filmed by Ed Emshwiller, the acknowledged technical genius of the independent-film movement, "Hallelujah" was described by the London film journal *Sight & Sound* as "one of the most completely American films ever made," and its anarchic humor and youthful high spirits pleased many American critics as well. Although "Hallelujah the Hills" earned back most of the twenty-five thousand dollars it cost to make, investors were not falling over each other in a rush to back independent films by the Mekas brothers or anyone else, and the costs of advertising, promotion, and commercial distribution were far in excess of what the Film-Makers' Cooperative could afford; Mekas frequently had to dig into his own meagre funds to square things. Quite clearly, the "new wave" of American feature films that Mekas and others had prophesied was not gathering much momentum, and this realization led to one of the major turning points in Mekas's career. From now on, Mekas decided, he would de-

vote himself more and more exclusively to the true "underground" (Stan VanDerBeek had coined the term in 1959)—to the defiantly noncommercial cinema of the extreme avant-garde.

AT this point in the early sixties, a new group of underground filmmakers was doing its best to subvert the still emergent sexual revolution. As Mekas had noted with disapproval in his early *Film Culture* essay, homosexual themes had permeated the films of Gregory Markopoulos, Kenneth Anger, and other members of the second avant-garde. By 1960, however, several young New York filmmakers were turning out pictures that were far more "deviant" than anything seen before, in a chaotic style that often parodied the most exotic Grade B Hollywood features of the nineteen-forties—in particular, the films of the stupefying

Maria Montez. Ken Jacobs, one of the originators of the new style, has said that he was inspired mainly by a film that the Surrealist artist Joseph Cornell had made in 1939 by cutting most of the footage out of a studio romance set somewhere east of Suez; in Cornell's truncated version, the heroine is forever shrinking in terror or nervously waiting for something to happen. Mekas himself found money to print a film by Jack Smith, a remarkable young man from Columbus, Ohio, who starred in many underground films of the period. Smith's film, his first to be released, was the forty-five-minute opus "Flaming Creatures." It was shot on out-of-date stock, on the roof of an abandoned building in the East Village, for a total cost of about three hundred dollars, and it soon managed to derange a surprising number of senses, cinematic and otherwise. To the tune of scratchy recordings of "Amapola" and other pseudo-Latin rhythms, fantastically draped beings, male and female (although one is often unsure which is which), commingle in settings of Spanish and Arabian décor (the two great exotic styles of Maria Montez features), parade their genitalia before the camera, and eventually indulge in a ridiculous orgy that seems to coincide with an earthquake. After seeing the film at a private screening, Mekas, the man who had once denounced "the conspiracy of homosexuality," reported to his *Voice* readers that "Flaming Creatures" was a great film, "a most luxurious outpouring of imagination, of imagery, of poetry, of movie artistry—comparable only to the work of the greatest, like von Sternberg."

Mekas was not kidding. "Flaming

Creatures" and others in this genre—Ken Jacobs' and Bob Fleischner's "Blonde Cobra," Ron Rice's "The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man"—struck him as the forerunners of a cinema revolution more far-reaching than anything that had gone before: "a turn from the New York realist school . . . toward a cinema of disengagement and new freedom." Invoking the shades of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, he described the world of these films as "a world of flowers of evil, of illuminations, of torn and tortured flesh; a poetry which is at once beautiful and terrible, good and evil, delicate and dirty." Mekas believed that these films must be seen, and he was ready to take the risk of showing them. He was ready, in fact, for a *cause célèbre*.

The opportunity soon arose. The Third International Experimental Film Competition at Knokke-le-Zoute

Belgium, a sort of avant-garde festival, had invited Mekas to be one of its judges. Mekas went over in December, 1963, accompanied by P. Adams Sitney and Barbara Rubin, an intensely militant girl whom Mekas had hired to work at the Cooperative and who had recently shot a film, "Christmas on Earth," that exceeded even "Flaming Creatures" in sexual explicitness. They took along a selection of underground films to show at the festival, including Anger's "Scorpio Rising," Markopoulos's "Twice a Man," Rice's "Chumlum," Brakhage's "Dog Star Man" and "Window Water Baby Moving," Breer's "Pat's Birthday," and Smith's "Flaming Creatures." The other judges drew the line at "Flaming Creatures," declaring it unfit for public screening in the festival theatre. Mekas withdrew from the jury in angry protest, and some of the American filmmakers demanded (unsuccessfully) to have their films withdrawn as well. Mekas and his associates remained in Knokke-le-Zoute, however, and gave a private screening of "Flaming Creatures" in their hotel suite, where it was seen by Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Roman Polanski, and other leading European *cinéastes*. The case had hit the European papers by this time, and interest in the film was building up. On the last day of the festival, Mekas and Barbara Rubin invaded the projection booth, overwhelmed the projectionist, and started to show "Flaming Creatures." Theatre personnel quickly cut off their power source and sought to eject them. At this point, the Belgian Minister of Justice appeared onstage to calm the

audience, and Barbara Rubin, having secured an alternate power line, started to project the film on his face. The current was again cut off, and in the darkness and confusion the Belgians regained control of the projection booth.

Sitney took the underground films on a tour of European cities after that, while Mekas returned home to arrange for the New York première of "Flaming Creatures." Since 1960, Mekas had been arranging irregular screenings of underground films at various movie theatres in and around Greenwich Village. Nobody had yet suggested that these films ought to be licensed, as commercial films were, but a contagion of censorship had recently begun to manifest itself—some people thought it had to do with the expected influx of visitors to the 1964 New York World's Fair—and a number of theatres and coffeehouses had been closed down. Although Mekas tried to circumvent the problem by listing the exhibitor of "Flaming Creatures" as the Love-and-Kisses-to-Censors Film Society and charging twenty-five cents for a membership card in lieu of admission, he fully expected trouble. Actually, "Flaming Creatures" ran for three successive Mondays at the Gramercy Arts Theatre early in 1964 without incident. But then, on February 15th, the police came and issued a summons to the theatre owner, who immediately terminated all underground-film screenings there. Mekas transferred his operations to the New Bowery Theatre, on St. Marks Place, where "Flaming Creatures" was shown on the night of March 3rd—shown for thirty minutes, that is, at which point the police rose up and arrested everybody in sight and confiscated the film and all the projection equipment they could lay their hands on. Mekas and the others spent the night in jail, and were released on bail the next afternoon. A week later, Mekas was arrested again, for showing Jean Genet's homosexual film "Un Chant d'Amour" at the tiny Writers' Stage, on East Fourth Street, and spent another night in jail. The Genet case was later dropped on a technicality, after letters in support of the film and of Mekas had been written by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Christiane Rochefort, and other European intellectuals, but Mekas drew a six-month suspended sentence for "Flaming Creatures." The case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, which voted by a narrow margin not to hear it. One of the justices recorded in favor of hear-

ing it was Abe Fortas, and his vote was subsequently interpreted by his political enemies as signifying that he was in favor of dirty movies.

There is no doubt but that the Mekas arrest and the floods of attendant publicity created a new situation for the independent filmmaker. The public, which had been largely oblivious of the underground's existence, assumed that "underground" was synonymous with dirty pictures, and this naturally irked a lot of avant-garde filmmakers. Also, a lot of them complained bitterly that Mekas was pushing Jack Smith and a few others and neglecting the rest. Mekas had no leisure for private quarrels. In addition to fighting the "Flaming Creatures" case through the courts, inveighing against censorship in the *Voice* and elsewhere ("Works of art are above obscenity and pornography"), dealing with distributors and would-be underground impresarios, overseeing the Cooperative, putting out *Film Culture*, financing the exposition of underground films that P. Adams Sitney and Barbara Rubin were taking around Europe (and trying to make peace between Sitney and Rubin, who were at cross-purposes much of the time), finding money for destitute filmmakers like Jack Smith and Ron Rice, and looking for another theatre to show films in, he was trying in spare moments to make his own films. A few days before the "Flaming Creatures" arrest, Mekas had filmed the Living Theatre production of Kenneth Brown's play "The Brig," a powerful indictment of Marine brutality; he was so strongly impressed by the play that he decided to film it as a series of real, rather than simulated, events, and he was so successful in this that the film won the documentary award at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. He made several other short films in 1964, but he had time to edit few of them. Carrying his Bolex around with him everywhere, he shot whatever struck his fancy—friends' weddings, the circus, Tiny Tim, sunrise over the city, Salvador Dali shampooing an automobile, Timothy Leary in his Millbrook retreat. At some point during the early sixties, it had occurred to him that what he was really doing was writing a diary with his camera. "One of my big problems, though, was that when I looked at the footage later and saw a tree or a snowstorm or something like that, there was nothing left of what it had meant to me when I filmed it," he said recently. "In reality, I was looking at that tree or snowstorm with all the memories that I brought to it, but my memories and attitudes were not re-

corded." It was at this stage that Mekas began to evolve his personal film style, with its quick cutting between images, short bursts of speeded-up action, jerky camera movements, superimpositions made by winding the film back and exposing it again, and single-frame shots. His intention was "to break down the image into single frames, into the smallest film note, and then to restructure that image, that tree, and to introduce myself into it by means of pace, rhythm, colors—to introduce my own state of being indirectly." And he wanted to do all this "in the camera"—not later, in the editing process.

THE crackdown on unlicensed film showings in the spring of 1964 drove the underground temporarily underground in fact as well as in name. For the next few months, the Film-Makers' Cooperative office on Park Avenue South was the meeting place of embattled filmmakers, who came there to discuss strategy, to fight among themselves, to screen their work, and sometimes to eat and sleep—although the Cooperative's paid secretary, Leslie Trumbull, frowned on that. Trumbull was working valiantly to bring some order and efficiency into the Coop's business affairs, which no one else had been able to do. His first act on being hired, in 1964, was to rule the long sofa in the office out of bounds for sleeping, thereby discouraging itinerant filmmakers, homeless poets, and hangers-on of all kinds from using the room as a crash pad. (He also decreed that the Coop would no longer spend money that it did not have—a blow to some filmmakers but rather a boon to Mekas, who had been in the habit of making up deficits out of his own pocket.) During the post-crackdown period, though, Mekas himself frequently bedded down under the film-cutting table in the office, too weary or too busy to go home. Funds were shorter than ever, with nothing coming in from New York screenings. In spite of such hardships, the period was an exceptionally productive one for independent filmmakers. Shortly before the "Flaming Creatures" bust, Mekas had introduced the public to the extraordinary films of George and Mike Kuchar, teen-age prodigies from the Bronx, whose Loews-haunted adolescence gave birth to such extravaganzas as "I Was a Teen Age Rumpot" and "Hold Me While I'm Naked." Bruce Baillie and several other West Coast filmmakers sent their work to the Cooperative office, and so did Harry Smith, a somewhat legendary older

figure. The most sensational discovery of the period, though, was Andy Warhol. A highly successful advertising artist who was just breaking into the New York art world, Warhol started in the summer of 1963 to make films—or anti-films, as some people called them. "Kiss," primarily a series of closeups of the filmmaker Naomi Levine kissing various companions; "Sleep," a six-hour film of a man sleeping; "Haircut," thirty-three minutes of a man having his hair cut; "Eat," forty-five minutes of artist Robert Indiana eating a mushroom; and other flowerings of the early Warhol cinema were shown first by Mekas at the Gramercy Arts Theatre, where they excited a good deal of strenuous controversy. Warhol's static, deliberately boring films, his habit of turning the camera on someone and letting it run, seemed like a slap in the face to filmmakers like Brakhage and Markopoulos—a crude attack on the whole idea that cinema could be used to portray the inner consciousness. Mekas nonetheless proclaimed him a genius. "I think that Andy Warhol is the most revolutionary of all filmmakers working today," he wrote in the *Voice*. "He is opening to filmmakers a completely new and inexhaustible field of cinema reality. . . . What to some still looks like actionless nonsense, with the shift of our consciousness which is taking place will become an endless variety and an endless excitement." Ready, as always, to help a fellow-filmmaker, Mekas served as cameraman on "Empire," Warhol's eight-hour character study of the Empire State Building, which was shot in one long sequence in July, 1964. "If all people could sit and watch the Empire State Building for eight hours and meditate upon it," Mekas told his readers, "there would be no more wars, no hate, no terror—there would be happiness regained upon earth." It was the sort of column that drew a lot of mail.

Those who saw a good deal of Mekas then often wondered how he could maintain his unflagging enthusiasm. He continued to live like an anchorite, on one meal a day, and he wore the same corduroy suit the year round. Filmmakers badgered him incessantly for funds, assuming that his income from lectures, writings, and film rentals was considerably larger than their own, but Mekas's yearly earnings from all sources never exceeded a thousand dollars. The truth is that not even his friends knew him terribly well. In that society of straining and perturbed talents, of self-conscious *poètes maudits* and initiates of the drug culture, Me-

kas's apparent lack of competitive ego and his refusal to take himself too seriously made it easy for the others to take him for granted. His generosity was unfailing. Jack Smith's "Normal Love," Barbara Rubin's "Christmas on Earth," Ron Rice's "The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man," and several of Gregory Markopoulos's films were shot with Mekas's Bolex. "I owe everything to Jonas," Barbara Rubin has said. "He started me making films. He gave me film, which he couldn't really afford for himself. He lent me his camera—everything. And I guess none of us gave him back enough—we didn't recognize his humanity." Unlike Adolfo, who married an American girl in 1965 and withdrew somewhat from the activities of the underground to make more or less conventional film comedies, Jonas Mekas has shown no interest in setting up a ménage. He is attracted to women—Adolfo once said he couldn't remember a time when his brother was not in love, although "it could be just a pair of eyes seen on a moving train"—but since Adolfo's marriage Jonas has lived alone. "He is a balanced person," according to Barbara Rubin, "even though he does not lead a balanced life. He has devoted himself *absolutely* to cinema. I think his being European makes a difference. He was always more intellectual, more concentrated, less chaotic than the rest of us. Jonas was always the one who held things together."

Mekas admits to being a fanatic in many ways, but, unlike most fanatics, he has never been too rigid to bend with the wind and alter his strategy. For years, he dreamed the European intellectual's dream of using art to change society. He marched against the Vietnam war, and made films that set out to expose the corruption of bourgeois society. Then, around 1964, his outlook underwent a change. As he put it, "Instead of marching and shouting against things I didn't like, I decided to try to construct something new, outside the system." Forcing the legal issue of censorship with "Flaming Creatures" had done no real good, he now felt—"the laws will change only when people change, and underground cinema will not get anything from going to the public." What independent filmmakers really needed was an opportunity to show their films unmoled by censors, nervous theatre owners, or the profit motive, and from 1964 on Mekas directed most of his energy toward this end. The result was the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, which is what Mekas and his friends

decided to call the changing programs of new films that they screened—usually once a week and often at midnight—in various movie theatres around town.

"One of the great things about Jonas," Andrew Sarris remarked not long ago, "is that he has never succumbed to the sin of despair." It would have been relatively easy to do so many times in the next four years, during which the Cinematheque (named in homage to Henri Langlois's film theatre and library in Paris) lost money at one temporary house after another. It opened at the New Yorker Theatre, at Broadway and West Eighty-eighth Street, in November, 1964; moved a month later to the Maidman, on West Forty-second Street; then to the City Hall Cinema, at 170 Nassau Street; then to the Astor Place Playhouse, on Lafayette Street; and then to the 41st Street Theatre, near Sixth Avenue, where it settled down for a relatively long stay of eighteen months. There was no more trouble with the police—word of the sexual revolution was spreading fast—but attendance at the screenings was rarely large enough to cover the costs. Mekas estimated that the deficits ranged between four hundred and a thousand dollars a month, which he had to make up somehow. He spent a lot of his time on the telephone trying to raise money. The foundations seemed loath to make grants to the underground cinema—though Mekas learned in 1966, to his annoyance, that someone had received a Rockefeller grant to write a book *about* underground filmmakers. In spite of increasing publicity, in spite of the fact that Madison Avenue advertising agencies regularly rented Coop films and incorporated their techniques into television commercials (collage animation, single-frame cutting to cram a dozen different images into a few seconds of air time), in spite of the sixties' taste for avant-gardism in general, there was never enough money for what

Mekas called "free" cinema, and many free *cinéastes* remained more or less destitute. The perpetual dissensions and feuds among the filmmakers added to Mekas's problems, and a good deal of the unrest centered on Andy Warhol. His early, static films had given way to movies with scripts—improbable and highly impromptu scripts, to be sure—and with performers, who were in many cases the same people who had earlier appeared in the films of Jack Smith and Ken Jacobs. Jack Smith himself became one of the Warhol

stars, along with Naomi Levine, Taylor Mead, Frances Francine, and "Mario Montez" (who appeared in "Flaming Creatures" as "Dolores Flores," the Spanish dancer). But if Warhol can be said to have appropriated the mock-Hollywood, camp style of Smith, Jacobs, and Rice, he used it for different and more disconcerting ends. "Flaming Creatures" looks curiously innocent today—a spoof of "forbidden" eroticism and a parody of pornography, rather than the real thing. The famous Warhol "stare," on the other hand—the unblinking camera's voyeuristic eye, which draws from his narcissistic non-actors the sort of personal revelations that one does not expect to see on the screen or anywhere else—is by no means innocent, and is sometimes pretty scary. Warhol's instant fame and his reputation for turning out a film a week piqued a number of filmmakers. Very few of them questioned his importance, however, and even those doubts evaporated when "The Chelsea Girls" opened, in September, 1966, at the 41st Street Theatre.

Asked once why "The Chelsea Girls" was a work of art, Warhol replied, with characteristic insouciance, "Well, first of all, it was made by an artist, and, second, that would come out as art." More verbal enthusiasts saw it as "quite possibly the first masterpiece from a generation that has learned to handle the medium of film as casually as an artist used to handle paint" (Brian O'Doherty), and as "a tragic film" full of "classical grandeur" and "the terror and hardness" of our age (Jonas Mekas). "The Chelsea Girls" consists of twelve separate episodes that were said to take place in different rooms of the Chelsea Hotel. References to specific rooms were deleted when it was pointed out that the hotel might well sue—an understandable reaction in view of the depicted goings on, which include simulated drug-taking, homosexual and lesbian behavior, and a climactic hysterical fit of aggression on the part of a man who claims to be the pope. Largely because of the remarkable screen presence of Warhol's freakish performers, who are seen mostly in extreme closeups that eliminate the background entirely (one critic has detected a resemblance here to Caravaggio's portraits), the film has an intermittently gripping fascination that makes its running time of more than three hours almost bearable. (It

would have run twice as long if Warhol had not decided to screen the episodes two at a time, side by side on a split screen.) The film is neither pornographic nor, by current standards, particularly racy, and its appeal to the general public remains something of a mystery. Following its initial run at the 41st Street Theatre, it moved into a commercial theatre uptown and became, as *Variety* would say, the underground cinema's first boffo smash.

The success of "The Chelsea Girls" gave great impetus to certain ideas that Mekas and others had never quite relinquished. Earlier in the year, Mekas, Shirley Clarke, and Lionel Rogosin had established a separate branch of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, to distribute films, like "The Chelsea Girls," that they thought might appeal to a wider public than the Coop's regular customers. The Film-Makers' Distribution Center, as they called it, set up shop in the Cooperative's office, raised some money, and embarked on a campaign to establish a network of small art theatres in different cities which would book feature-length films by Markopoulos, Warhol, Robert Downey, Adolfo Mekas, Storm DeHirsch, and several others, in addition to the three initiators. For a time, it looked as though the underground might be going to surface with a notable splash. Cooperative rentals were booming, as more and more film departments were established at universities and colleges in all parts of the country, and the contributions to film art of Mekas and his colleagues were receiving increasing recognition. (The Philadelphia College of Art honored Mekas in June, 1966, for his "devotion, passion, and selfless dedication to the rediscovery of the newest art.") In September, moreover, the fourth annual New York Film Festival gave official and substantial recognition to the underground with a Special Events series devoted to independent filmmaking. The Film-Makers' Distribution Center hired additional office workers just to handle the bookings of "The Chelsea Girls."

But then, as sometimes happens in such cases, Warhol decided that he could do better distributing his own films. He withdrew them from the Center, and the Center reverted almost immediately from a money-making to a money-losing operation. What with the costs of promotion and distribution already contracted for in several cities, moreover, the losses were

considerably higher than those Mekas was used to coping with. Mekas and Shirley Clarke put all the income from their own films into the Center, and spent more and more of their time in a frantic search for outside support. Elia Kazan co-signed a six-thousand-dollar bank loan for them, and Otto Preminger gave the Center five thousand dollars. Ironically, though, the general relaxation of censorship that had come about since the "Flaming Creatures" scandals (and which many people attributed in part to the impassioned anti-censorship battles of Mekas and a few others) now seemed to be working against the film underground. Several theatres that had agreed to book the Center's films had subsequently become outlets for the "sexploitation" movies that were starting to flood the market. (Some theatre owners thought they were getting such movies when they booked underground film art, which led to cruel surprises on all sides.) The freer moral climate of the middle and late sixties had also opened the way to nudity, explicit sex, and relaxed language in the commercial cinema, some of whose flashier young directors borrowed copiously from the underground's technical and conceptual bag of tricks. (Hand-held-camera work, such as that which marked the foxhunt scenes of Tony Richardson's "Tom Jones," was becoming all the rage.) The commercial cinema was increasingly innovative, while the underground seemed to have lost energy and direction. Around the Film-Makers' Cooperative office, moreover, there were several members who disapproved of spending money on ventures that stained the purity of noncommercial cinema, and who tended to think that any fund-raising efforts should be directed toward the realization of their own projects. Stan Brakhage, who had quit the Coop and then thought better of it, told Shirley Clarke that she was nothing more than a commercial filmmaker. Brakhage spoke bitterly against the Center, and by the end of 1967 Mekas himself was beginning to doubt the wisdom of the enterprise.

In the midst of all these uncertainties, moreover, Mekas was forced to close down the Cinematheque at the 41st Street Theatre, because increased rentals had made the screenings unprofitable. He had by no means given up the idea of the Cinematheque, however—perhaps in a smaller version.

What with the distribution "sharks" moving their skin flicks into the art-film houses, Mekas estimated that the average audience for true underground film art in the foreseeable future would be from thirty to fifty people per screening. As it happened, George Maciunas, Mekas's Lithuanian friend—an entrepreneur seemingly undaunted by the failure of one business venture after another—had recently founded what he called the Fluxhouse Cooperative, whose aim was to provide low-cost housing for artists in the area south of Houston Street now referred to as SoHo. With a twenty-thousand-dollar grant from a foundation, Maciunas had bought an old loft building at 80 Wooster Street and was in the process of renovating it. Mekas got together enough money to put down a deposit on the ground floor and basement of 80 Wooster Street, and in the summer of 1967 he and several other filmmakers threw themselves into the herculean job of turning the ground floor into a small theatre. They had, as usual, no money to start with, and although they did most of the work themselves, the bills mounted alarmingly. "I am on guerrilla warfare now," Mekas wrote in his diary.

He spent his days scrounging for small sums—"anything goes, almost skirmish tactics, dollar by dollar." This was the year that he and Sitney saw the two roses on the sidewalk and enlisted the aid of St. Theresa of Ávila, and, by one miracle or another, the new Cinematheque managed to open to the public that December. The following spring, its accumulated debts were paid off in full with the help of a timely forty-thousand-dollar grant from the Ford Foundation—the first foundation money Mekas ever received.

The Cinematheque was open, but it was operating without a license from the New York City Department of Buildings. Mekas had applied for one, and he now found himself in a labyrinth familiar to New York property owners. A series of building inspectors arrived, followed by a police captain. "They all indicated that they would appreciate a few bucks," Mekas wrote in his journal. "I said no, so they laughed and wrote out another summons." As a result, the new theatre never did get its license, and the screenings there ended six months after they had begun. The Cinematheque became a vagabond once more—there were

screenings at the Methodist Church on West Fourth Street, at the Bleecker Street Cinema, at the Elgin, at the Gotham Art, at the Jewish Museum on Tuesday evenings, and, for one uneasy month, at the Gallery of Modern Art—the last an arrangement that Mekas abruptly terminated because, as he explained in a letter to the Gallery, attempts had been made to censor some of the films, the two-dollar admission charge was too high for “serious film students,” and “the building itself, the tradition of bad art in the galleries, exudes a very stifling and bad atmosphere not suitable for presentation of any living art.” It was a bleak period, all things considered. The Film-Makers’ Distribution Center kept sinking deeper and deeper into debt, and Mekas was afraid that its debts might eventually overwhelm the Cooperative as well. Shirley Clarke and a few others argued that if the Center could hold out just a little longer it would show a profit. But Mekas thought otherwise, and in the spring of 1970, with a city marshal threatening to auction off both the Center’s and the Coop’s property to settle a judgment by a theatre owner who had not been paid, he closed it down. When the Center went out of business, its debts totalled close to eighty thousand dollars. Mekas made himself personally and legally responsible for the entire sum, this being the only way he could insure that the Coop would not sink as well. “So now I have to eat this soup, and it doesn’t taste like it’s really good cooking,” he wrote in a memo mailed to all the Cooperative’s members. “It stinks, in fact. I wish you a good summer.”

By means of arduous negotiation, Mekas was able to get his creditors to reduce their claims from eighty to about forty thousand dollars, which he agreed to pay off in monthly installments. Somehow, during all the confusions of 1968, he had managed to edit twenty hours of his own film footage into the three hours of “Diaries, Notes, and Sketches,” which earned him nearly seven thousand dollars—most of it from a single showing on German television. Every cent went to reduce the debt, as did his fees from lectures and writings. As of this moment, he has brought the amount still owed down to about eight thousand, and his refusal to complain, or even to discuss what is still a decidedly lonely effort, has added considerably to his reputation for saintliness.

THE Film-Makers’ Distribution Center had failed and the Cinematheque was fading, but, astonishingly enough, money had become available for another Mekas project—a film “academy,” dedicated to showing, in repertory, the highest achievements of avant-garde film. Mekas had started thinking about it in 1967, and in 1968 the Film Art Fund—set up by Mekas’s old friend and fellow-filmmaker Jerome Hill and by Allan Masur, a lawyer with a special interest in the arts—came into being for the primary purpose of financing “the first film museum exclusively devoted to the film as an art,” to be known as Anthology Film Archives. The Film Art Fund worked out a contract for Anthology to operate as an independent film library and theatre within Joseph Papp’s Public Theatre, on Lafayette Street, in the old Astor Library building. The Fund also raised three hundred and sixty thousand dollars for the construction of Anthology’s theatre, a ninety-seat temple of cinematic art, designed by the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, which opened in December, 1970. Kubelka, who is also a curator of the Österreichisches Filmmuseum, in Vienna, had wanted for years to construct a theatre that would eliminate every distraction to the eye and ear and permit total concentration on the screen. He came close to achieving this goal at Anthology, where each seat is a kind of isolated viewing booth, with blinders on each side and a canopy overhead, and where the black walls and ceiling, black carpets, black velvet upholstery, and complete absence of lighting save what is reflected from the screen make it necessary for the faithful to reach their seats by a process of grope and stumble.

Although many find the viewing experience at Anthology novel and pleasant, there has been considerable criticism of Kubelka’s black box. Comedy falls flat there, it is said, because there is so little sense of shared laughter. Amos Vogel has called it “authoritarian cinema,” which forces the viewer to sit, look, and listen in a Kubelka-prescribed manner. Other critics have suggested that the theatre was designed specifically for one film—Kubelka’s own “Arnulf Rainer,” a six-and-a-half-minute imageless, visually and aurally stentorian hymn to cinema’s four basic elements of light, darkness, sound, and silence. To arrive one

minute late for one of Anthology’s three daily screenings is to be denied entrance by Mrs. Eugenia Mitchell, the polite but adamant ticket-taker; Kubelka himself once blocked a particularly insistent latecomer by resorting to karate, in which he holds a black belt. Criticism has also been directed against Anthology’s policy of showing foreign films without subtitles (which distract the eye), and, of course, nearly everybody has some complaint about the selection of films. Most of the complaints are directed at Mekas, as usual, although his is only one voice of five on the selection committee, whose original members (six then) were Mekas, Brakhage, Kubelka, Sitney, the West Coast filmmaker James Broughton, and the critic Ken Kelman. The committee deliberated for two years on the stocking of the Anthology, and for a time—until Brakhage resigned, and a simple majority vote was substituted for unanimous rulings—it looked as though it could never agree on anything. The list now runs to two hundred and thirty-one films (plus fifty-two more voted in but not yet acquired). They are shown in a repeating cycle that takes about six weeks to complete, so that anyone who wants to absorb what the committee considers “the heights of the art of cinema” from 1899 to 1971 can do so in a couple of months of assiduous viewing. Although the list is weighted rather heavily toward the various avant-garde movements, with a great deal of Brakhage, Markopoulos, Anger, and other current heroes, it does include such early Hollywood classics as Griffith’s “Intolerance” and Chaplin’s “The Gold Rush,” together with representative samplings of the great Russian, European, and Japanese films. The total absence of films by Godard, Truffaut, Antonioni, Fellini, Hawks, Hitchcock, and other much-admired contemporary narrative-film directors greatly annoys some critics, and the failure to include such independents as Shirley Clarke, Ed Emshwiller, and even Stan VanDerBeek, the man who gave the underground cinema its name, has greatly miffed some filmmakers. According to Mekas, none of these exclusions is to be looked upon as final. Mekas himself is strong on certain films by Hawks and Hitchcock and Godard (*late* Godard), which he plans to propose at one or another of the selection committee’s twice-annual meet-

ings. The committee is still "in the process of emergence," he says. No clear guidelines exist as yet, for example, in the matter of film comedies, many of which seem to consist of treacly stories with a few great comic moments. The fact that there are so few contemporary narrative films reflects the committee's feeling that narrative filmmaking is the area most heavily compromised by the taint of commercialism. In their desire to avoid current fashions, Mekas says, "we feel it's better to underinclude than to overinclude."

It strikes some of his colleagues as ironic that Mekas, who was often criticized in the past for his "permissiveness" in showing any film by any filmmaker, should now be running such a rigorously selective archive. Mekas worries about this himself. He wants to revive the now defunct Cinematheque by devoting a period of several days between each Anthology repertory cycle to the showing of new films, and he is currently trying to raise money for this purpose. In general, though, he feels that the need for his Cinematheque is no longer as pressing as it used to be. New York now has the Millennium Film Workshop and Film Forum, which regularly screen new work by independent spirits, and both the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art have programs devoted to the low-budget avant-garde. (Willard Van Dyke, director of the film department at the Modern, said recently that MOMA's Tuesday-afternoon "Cineprobe" was "really a response to the activities of Jonas at his various cinematheques.") "Part of the early battle has been won," Mekas said not long ago. "Films now are more readily accepted as an art form on a formal basis. What's happened during the last ten years is that a whole new range of possibilities in cinema has opened up, and this, I think, is one of the main achievements of the so-called underground."

WHEN Anthology opened its doors, in December, 1970, Mekas said that he would give two years of his life to getting it started, after which he would withdraw to work on his own films. His friends have heard him say this often enough in the past, and nobody really believes he will do anything of the sort. Mekas never seems to shed responsibilities; he simply compartmentalizes them. In his cluttered office adjoining the Anthology theatre and in

his dark, Spartan room at the Chelsea Hotel, bookshelves and desks divide the space into separate areas for his separate jobs—Anthology business, *Film*

Culture, "Movie Journal," and so on. He is currently under great pressure to secure new financing for Anthology. He still looks at dozens of new films each week and ministers to the ever-critical needs of independent filmmakers, who troop in and out of the Anthology office at all hours. (Filmmakers are heavy users of Anthology's Xerox machine.) Occasionally, he asks himself why the hell he doesn't just quit and concentrate on making his own films.

"I'm not too clear about it even yet," he said, in a reflective mood not long ago. "Maybe I did what I did—accomplished what I accomplished—only because of my indecision among a number of things. Maybe that's part of my character. I always think, Oh, I'm wasting my time. These last months, I am thinking that very much.

And my films are sitting there in the hotel—hours and hours of footage waiting to be edited. But I will come to them sooner or later—some week when I do nothing else. There will be two other volumes of my film diaries, the first one taking in the period of the fifties and sixties—Brooklyn and Orchard Street, Barbara Rubin and Allen Ginsberg and all those people, the Women Strike for Peace, all those early protest marches. I have much footage on that. The second volume will go from 1969 to the present, whenever that happens to be."

In Lithuania today, Mekas is considered one of the most important living poets. His collected poems (four volumes in all) were published in his homeland for the first time in 1971, and quickly sold out. He is not a prolific poet—he may think about a poem for a year or more before he writes it down—and he feels he could never write poetry in any language except Lithuanian. But it seems likely that the qualities that distinguish him as a poet also mark his filmmaking, with its more or less international language. His "Diaries, Notes, and Sketches," in fact, may be one of the most authentically poetic films ever made, as well as one of the most personal. Barbara Rubin has called the film "a summary of everybody's trip in that whole period," and, in a sense, it can be seen as a marvellously inclusive home movie of the underground-film movement. The filmmakers who were Mekas's friends

are there, along with Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, and dozens of others whose lives Mekas has touched. And the New York that they inhabited is there, too,

with its dingy lofts and streets and cafeterias, its peace marches and Hare Krishna singers, and its great escape hatch of Central Park. But the medium through which we see these people and scenes is the camera eye that has become, after ten years of practice and experiment, a living extension of Mekas's unique sensibility. Each shot, each motion of the camera, each sound on the sound track (snatches of Chopin, street noises, Mekas narrating) is suffused with the presence of an "auteur" whom we come to know more intimately, perhaps, during the film's three hours than anyone has ever known him in person, and whose company wears extremely well. Up to now, Mekas has been known principally for his untiring efforts on behalf of other film artists. It would be a fine irony if his own "Diaries, Notes, and Sketches" should turn out to be, as some people already proclaim, the supreme achievement of the New American Cinema.

Discussing the film the other day, Mekas conceded that its point of view was deeply and sometimes unwittingly personal. Time and again throughout the film, for example, we see New York under a blanket of snow. "I thought I was shooting New York as it is," Mekas said, "but when I looked at the film I realized that my New York was a fantasy—that it does not really have so much snow. I was shooting my memories. Winter memories are very special to me. At home, everybody worked outside in the summer, but in the winter we all sat together in rooms, and so the memories of my childhood are very much of the winters. In my 'Diaries,' this city of steel and concrete becomes like a Walden, with trees and birds, the seasons very noticeable. What my 'Diaries' contain is maybe what I would like New York to be."

After a pause, he added, "And, you know, during the period when I was shooting the 'Diaries' I felt very much that New York was my city. On my way back to New York from somewhere else, I felt that I was coming home—that my real roots were here. But now I'm not so sure anymore. I feel now that I haven't found my real roots—that I have no place. I keep looking ahead and wondering."

—CALVIN TOMKINS