

## Celebrating Jonas Mekas

### ***Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches***

December 8, 2019 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

*I make home movies—therefore I live.*

*I live—therefore I make home movies.*

— Jonas Mekas

Jonas Mekas (b. Semeniskiai, Lithuania 1922; d. New York City 2019) was without a doubt the world's foremost advocate for personal/poetic/underground/avant-garde cinema. In his weekly *Village Voice* column "Movie Journal" (1959–1971), he chronicled the rise of the New American Cinema. As a courageous exhibitor he championed the (at the time) controversial works of Maya Deren, Gregory Markopoulos, Barbara Rubin, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol. To this day, New York's Anthology Film Archives (founded by Mekas in 1970) continues his vision with an astounding 900+ screenings annually in its Lower East Side edifice.

Widely recognized for this advocacy and infrastructural vision, Mekas was also a prolific filmmaker whose personal, diary-style films are noted for their in-the-moment spontaneity and their joyous (if world-weary) introspection and attention to small moments of life. As a year-end echo to Cinematheque's February 13 screening of Mekas' *Birth of a Nation* (presented three weeks after his death)—which focused on relationships within the international filmmaking community—Cinematheque closes its 2019 exhibition year with a rare screening of Mekas' legendary *Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (1964–69). Ever the drifting romantic (even if living as a self-proclaimed "raving maniac of the cinema"), Mekas' 180-minute *Walden* is an epic tour-de-force of diaristic filmmaking, intimately embodying cinematic reaction to events of daily life—"situations, friends, seasons of the year"—in mid-to-late '60s New York City. Screening in 16mm, tonight's program represents the first Bay Area screening of this major film in over twenty-five years.

*Since 1950 I have been keeping a film diary. I have been walking around with my Bolex and reacting to the immediate reality: situations, friends, New York, seasons of the year. On some days I shot ten frames, on others ten seconds, still on others ten minutes. Or I shot nothing. When one writes diaries, it's a retrospective process: you sit down, you look back at your day, and you write it all down. To keep a film (camera) diary, is to react (with your camera) immediately, now, this instant: either you get it now, or you don't get it at all. To go back and shoot it later, it would mean restaging, be it events or feelings. To get it now, as it happens, demands the total mastery of one's tools (in this case, Bolex): it has to register the reality to which I react and also it has to register my state of feeling (and all the memories) as I react. Which also means, that I had to do all the structuring (editing) right there, during the shooting, in the camera. All footage that you'll see [...] is exactly as it came out from the camera: there was no way of achieving it in the editing room without destroying its form and content. *Walden* contains materials from the years 1965-69, strung together in chronological order. For the soundtrack I used some of the sounds that I collected during the same period: voices, subways, much street noise, bits of Chopin (I am a romantic), and other significant and insignificant sounds. "They tell me, I should be always searching; but I'm only celebrating what I see."*

— Jonas Mekas

**Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches** (1964–69) by Jonas Mekas; 16mm, color, sound, 180 minutes, print from the Film-Makers' Cooperative

*First draft edition: Diaries, Notes and Sketches* also known as *Walden* is issued in 1969 with the air of someone about to cast themselves to the wind. "This film being what is..." In fact, Mekas already has, in the previous five years, facing the city bare, like those branches in Central Park, stripped essentially of his past, and ready like nature to do the destructive-creative work. Invent. Compose. "I took what I could from desperation... I was practicing. I was preparing myself, or trying to keep in touch with my camera." In truth what he was doing was committing himself to the "knowing in the unknown." Williams said it: "There is no return: rolling up out of chaos, a nine months wonder, the city, the man, an identity—an interpretation both ways. Rolling up, diverse, reverse, the drunk, the sober, the illustrious, the gross, one. In ignorance, a certain knowledge, undispersed, its own undoing." (*Paterson*)

What is *Walden*, as a place, as a moment? New York City, circa 1965-69? "I only know myself as a human entity, the scene, so to speak of thoughts and affections," Thoreau wrote. Here too *Walden* (and walled-in) is the scene, the correlative of self and the action that takes place in the film. It's a drama of city, community, film community and self. It "records" breaking out: Timothy Leary, street workers chipping at walls, the Velvet Underground, peace marchers on Times Square, Chinese New Year, sending a new journal (*Film Culture*), the seasons breaking into one another. "Finding" what's there, as Bazin knew, is a metaphor as much as anything else.

More than this, the image reality and the emotional reality ("the sense of place") affect the style, and *Walden* is the scene of Mekas and his particular response. Here he breaks loose from "habits of thought," habits of film, and discovers appropriate visual analogs for the immediacy with which he is called to respond.

Nowhere is this clearer I suspect than in two moments representative of the whole (as representative as any in a three hour film). The first, the opening passage: San Juan de la Cruz over Timothy Leary's Millbrook and a little girl on the trampoline, the camera following, entranced in the jumping: "I say then... that there is no better remedy than to suffer, to do, and to be silent and to close the senses to the inclination toward and practice of solitude." And the second the "Notes on the Circus" part of the film, at once a travesty and reclamation of the child's world of the circus where Mekas submits to the jungle of perception in all of its glitter ("Sadie Green, the vamp of New Orleans"), and wrests from the experience the child at the center (a superimposition) and an image of innocence, reshaped, summoned up in the nursery rhyme at the close.

The film asks what it is to be open, to have an "original relation" with the world. In New York City, circa 1965-69, it might be put: how to be engaged with life, to submit to the darkness and light (the breaking out) without being lost or part of an empty masquerade? The film is a remarkable achievement, personal triumph and cultural record. It asserts Mekas' power to cross a frontier between dynamic sound, light, movement (immersion in events) and stasis, a stable center in moments of rest and repose. (Judith E. Briggs: *Jonas Mekas*. Published 1980 by Film in The Cities and the Walker Art Center.

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*Scott Macdonald*: Am I correct in saying that at the time of *Walden* you had a sense of the increasing fragility of the things that mattered most to you?

*Jonas Mekas*: There is a very pessimistic passage of "narration" or "talking" in the Central Park sequence where I say that perhaps before too long there won't be any trees or flowers. But I don't mean for that attitude to dominate the entire film. In general I would say that I feel there will always be *Walden* for those who really want it. Each of us lives on a small island, in a very small circle of reality, which is our own reality. I made up a joke about a Zen monk standing in Times Square with people asking, "So what do you think about New York—the noise, the traffic?" The monk says, "What noise? What traffic?" You *can* cut it all out. No, it's not that we can have all this today, but tomorrow it will be gone. It *is* threatened, but in the end it's up to us to keep those little bits of paradise alive and defend them and see that they survive and grow.

Of course, there is another side to this, another danger. Even in concentration camps, in forced labor camps, people could still find enjoyment in certain things. Not everybody in the forced labor camps sat with his or her nose to the floor, saying, "How dreadful! How dreadful!" There are moments of feeling, happiness, friendships, and even beauty, no matter where you are. So what I said before could be seen as a justification and acceptance of any status quo. I wouldn't want what I say interpreted that way. Somewhere I would put a limit to what I, or a human being in general, would or should accept. As Gandhi did.

The question is how one is to counteract the destruction. Should one walk around with posters and placards or should one retreat and grow natural food in Vermont and hope that by producing something good, and sharing it with others, one can persuade those others to see the value of what you're doing and to move in a similar direction?

Change can't come from the top. The top, which is occupied by various government, is totally rotten. This civilization cannot be revolutionized, changed: it has to be *replaced*. (Jonas Mekas interviewed by Scott MacDonald. *A Critical Cinema 2: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*.)