

BALTIC CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Jonas Mekas

Lithuanian-American Jonas Mekas has been called the “midwife” of the independent film industry in the United States. His creative output includes a lifetime of creative filmmaking and exhibitions, as well a long history of nourishing avant-garde and alternative filmmaking in this country.



Mekas was born on Christmas Eve, 1922, in Semeniskiai, a quiet farming village in Lithuania. When the German army entered the country, he began editing an anti-Nazi underground newspaper, but his typewriter was stolen, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he was arrested. So he and his brother, Adolfas, left Lithuania to attend university in Vienna. But their train was stopped in Germany, and they ended up in a forced labor camp near Hamburg. They escaped in 1945, hid on a farm for two months until the war ended, and afterwards lived in a series of displaced persons camps, including Wisenbaden and Mainz, where Mekas attended university.

There, for the first time in their lives, the Mekas brothers saw films about things that stirred them, such as *The Search* by Fred Zinnemann (1948), a film about the lives of displaced persons, and it made them angry. In their minds, the film touched on nothing of the experience of displaced persons. Outraged, they began to write scripts and resolved to start making their own films as soon as they could afford a camera. Both brothers would go on to lead long careers in film, and their original motive would remain unchanged: to protest against what cinema was, and to look toward the promise of what it could be.

Finally, on October 29, 1949, the brothers arrived in Williamsburg, New York. Two weeks later Jonas borrowed the money to buy his first Bolex 16-mm camera and began to record moments of his life. Living as a displaced person, Jonas was haunted by his memories of Lithuania. In his journals he speaks of his loneliness during his first years in America, and of the exiled Lithuanian community's empty hopes of a return to their homeland. In the otherwise industrial environment of New York, Mekas' insistence on filming natural subjects like flowers and trees and snow were a way of relocating the rural Lithuania of his childhood.

In this strange and unfamiliar city, Mekas and his brother watched films. They watched hungrily, as much as they could – European films, westerns, dramas, comedies, and avant garde programs. Mekas became increasingly involved in the film community, and in 1953–1954 he began putting together his own programs of avant garde film at Gallery East and a Film Forum series at Carl Fisher Auditorium. The following year, he founded *Film Culture*, a film journal that dealt critically with the avant garde, Hollywood and, particularly in its early years, European art film. In New York, however, Mekas was already finding himself at the centre of a burgeoning film culture. He would later call the movement New American Cinema, and its proponents included Amos Vogel, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Robert Frank, and Gregory Markopoulos. Mekas began writing at the *Village Voice* as a film critic in 1958, though his

“serious” ambitions as a critic were soon pushed aside for what Mekas called his “midwife” vocation. He turned away from feature filmmaking and devoted his column to a the new, non-narrative forms of cinema emerging in America. His writings were refreshingly unlike the stiff, cynical writing of most critics: alive, passionate, and polemical. Hear his enthusiasm in this call to arms:

Let's record the dying century and the birth of another man... Let's surround the earth with our cameras, hand in hand, lovingly; our camera is our third eye that will lead us out and through ... Nothing should be left unshown or unseen, dirty or clean: Let us see and go further, out of the swamps and into the sun.

In 1959, Mekas helped to found New American Cinema Group, a new model of distribution and exhibition for independent film. Unlike Amos Vogel's Cinema 16 series of experimental films and other programs, which were selective in the films they screened, Mekas championed the right for *all* films to be shown. The collective became the Film-makers' Cooperative in 1962, and soon after, similar groups came together in San Francisco (Canyon Cinema) and London (The London Co-op), based on the Coop model.

Mekas, together with P. Adams Sitney and Jerome Hill, began work on Anthology Film Archives in 1969. It opened in 1970 as a film museum, screening space, and a library, with Mekas as its director. In 1971, Mekas, along with Stan Brakhage, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, James Broughton, and P. Adams Sitney, began the ambitious Essential Cinema project to establish a canon of important cinematic works. Over the past 35 years Anthology has grown to include video programs, a new filmmakers series, and archival projects, all with Mekas at the helm. For over forty years, he has been independent cinema's champion, protector, and yes, its midwife.