

Avant Garde Filmmaking and Personal Cinema
as the basis for a Cinema Freedom

Armando Salazar

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The cinema that Jonas Mekas (1922-2019) produced in the sixties as part of the underground movement based in New York City left a deep imprint on the ways of filming for the future. His practice is framed in a personal cinema, with a documentary air, inspired by the formal ruptures of the avant-garde and, simultaneously, with a particular use of image, montage and some sound explorations. This essay will make an analysis of the forms of work that Mekas embodied, especially in one of his best-known pieces: *Walden: Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (1969. 2h57min) and will propose a reading of cinema as a medium and as a language that, focused on a reevaluation of everyday life, frees it from the conditions that this medium usually carries: mass entertainment, telling of a story, Aristotelian dramaturgy and disconnection with the real to give some examples.

This particular film represents a way of working that was novel for the time and has left its mark on filmmakers and amateurs alike in what, over the years, has come to be known as the Diary Film. Mekas concentrated on filming in an intense and non-stop manner with a 16mm Bolex camera. As a migrant to New York from his native Lithuania, the new world fascinated him, and he filmed on and off. His primary interest was to start with documentation of his daily life and create images with a poetic aura charged with the feelings and sensations he had while filming. He distinguished between "writing, where "diaries are prose statements" and avant-garde diary films, which are "closer to poetic feeling and form."¹. He intended to capture his surroundings: his home, his hotel room, the view from the window, the weather and the passing of the seasons, meetings with friends, gatherings of filmmakers and in the case of *Walden*, New York's Central Park. The film is full of images of the park in the different seasons, but above all, the people who occupy it and its natural spaces: ponds, paths, trees, etc. In that intentionality, what Mekas proposed was to transmit

¹ Smith, *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mekas*,53.

with film what he as a human being, as a migrant and as a filmmaker felt at the moment of capture, to "capture reality as closely as possible to how my Self is seeing it."²

This proposal: to capture what surrounded him, to try to do it from his emotionality and to capture that emotionality in the frame, is the starting point from which he confronts the canon of traditional cinema. "On one side, there is Hollywood; on the other side are the experimental filmmakers. The middle, the largest area, the whole human reality, sung by the poets and painted on canvas from time immemorial-as the source of all art-is lying fallow"³. Mekas thus proposes a political point of view against the machinery of the Hollywood spectacle. His territory of attack is not fiction, the weapon that the film industry uses with excellent efficiency. Still, the documentary, but not a documentary that directly captures the real but a personal documentary that "emphasizes subjective response over traditional documentary recording and, to abstraction, escapes the "oneness" of filmmaker and camera by disrupting indexical photography or eschewing it altogether."⁴

This subjective response is the trademark of Mekas' cinema. For him, the world is not only a space full of information that must be recorded, but the only way to record it (film it) is through subjectivity itself, from the self. *Walden* is then a film that needs a spectator who accepts the game proposed by Mekas. Its digestion is not easy. The countless digressions make it complex and require a commitment for its viewing. The images do not last long enough due to the camera editing technique, on the one hand, as well as the instability of the shots. On the other hand, the absence of a tripod does not mean a lack of resources, the limitations of the chosen format: 16mm, filming material sometimes out of date and the evident and notorious use of the hand-held camera, are an attitude towards the fact of what it means to make films, what it means to be a filmmaker. If the ordinary viewer, accustomed to

² Mekas, *The Diary Film*, 192.

³ Mekas, *The Experimental Film in America*. *Film Culture* 3:15- 20.

⁴ Hart, *Extensions of Our Body Moving, Dancing: The American Avant-Garde's Theories of Handheld Subjectivity*, 61.

Hollywood's transparent narrative, seeks a similar experience in *Walden*, they will receive quite the opposite: "it becomes impossible for the viewer to contemplate every shot, as you instead get led by the visceral experience of the rhythms of the images passing by."⁵

Using the handheld camera is essential to understand the language that Mekas uses. Its origin comes from the postwar years, with filmmakers like Marie Menken and Maya Deren. A technique that becomes a creative gesture: "In the 1960s the result would be the articulation by Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas of the first true theory of handheld cinematography, what I call "gestural expressionism." With this term, I mean to describe a mode of cinematography— and an understanding of handheld camerawork—that emphasizes the expressive, indexical connection between camera operator and the image"⁶.

Mekas' style is a declaration of principles about the forms that natural attention carries within itself. The human being walks the world, focusing on various situations that change throughout the day. Man's presence in the world is chaotic, and his gaze shifts from one side to the other while the world continuously changes. If we add to this the walker's mood, personality and subjectivity, the result is anything but peaceful, clear, understandable or logical. Mekas proposes the existence of a profoundly human cinema where he is the main subject but not the protagonist. In his words: "The diary form, traditionally, belongs in the narrative end of art. And the clearest dividing line of the narrative from the non-narrative, if there is one, traditionally has been the protagonist: in the narrative there is a protagonist, and the non-narrative forms have only the creator's, the artist's presence, or ego. And it's through me that every detail is presented, day by day, and you gain more and more knowledge about me as we go further and further..."⁷ *Walden* is full of moments where this aesthetic is evident, an example, at the beginning of REEL 6, in the images of Wendy's wedding (in

⁵ Smith, *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mekas*, 63.

⁶ Hart, *Extensions of Our Body Moving, Dancing: The American Avant-Garde's Theories of Handheld Subjectivity*, 39.

⁷ Mekas, 'Presentation of Diaries, Notes and Sketches (Reels 1 and 2) at Millenium, New York, December 14 1969', 13.

Walden, there are four weddings, all of Mekas' friends), the camera captures fragmented images of the wedding from the exit of the church to the reception (the shots always last a few seconds). At the same time, the sound is expressively superimposed on the images: a powerful rock theme that makes the reading of the social event become what the performer feels like being there. Despite being his friends, his material is not made to give an account of the wedding itself but of the feeling of Mekas, the filmmaker. In Mekas' words: "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 the footage you'll see in the Diaries is exactly as it came out from the camera."⁸

Another paradigmatic example is given in the film's final part when he shoots John Lennon and Yoko Ono at a happening in Montreal where, in their pyjamas, on a hotel bed, they receive the press to make a call for world peace. This event, famous for including the interpretation of the song "Give Peace a Chance" (a song by John Lennon), is not filmed by Mekas to explain to us, via the tools of the traditional documentary, the details of an event of the counterculture of the sixties, but to transmit through his cinema, his feelings at the chosen moment; once again, the editing is chaotically fragmented, and the attention is dispersed, the only thing that sustains the images is the song. Mekas seems to tell us that he is there, that he shares the event and that his mind is constantly going back and forth in space as if trying to understand something beyond the obvious. John Lennon is famous, but for Mekas, that is not the most important thing about the event. It is something else that he tries to find with his camera and his editing, "the need to respond immediately with the camera to and in the present, and the need to subjectivize that recording—as the essential conditions of the film

⁸ Mekas, *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue*."

diary, and the first fully to turn them to advantage, and eventually to invest filmic attention to daily life with religious significance."⁹ Or in the words of Mekas: "I had to liberate the camera, and to embrace all the subjective film-making techniques and procedures that were either already available, or were just coming into existence. . . . I had to put myself into it, to merge myself with the reality I was filming, to put myself into it indirectly, by means of pacing, lighting, exposures, movements."¹⁰

In the opposite sense to this idea, two very particular sequences in the film work differently. They are two sequences (in the traditional sense of cinema, where we access a clear and understandable time-space), each with a girl in Central Park, portrayed as silent, reflective characters in direct contact with nature, caressing flowers and grass. These two "portraits" placed conspicuously at the beginning and end of the film seem to tell us that Mekas finds in his subjects a representation of his feeling about the world. Here the camera observes and is less chaotic. Still, it is not Mekas the filmmaker's feeling that the image carries, but rather the sense of the filmed subject and the filmmaker's fascination with that feeling. However, when Mekas himself tells us: "My filming techniques are determined by my reactions to what I am filming. I am not filming reactions; these are my reactions."¹¹, This analysis carries less weight. For him, these sequences charged with another aesthetic do not differ from his particular norm. He films what he feels.

The hand-held camera and in-camera editing (fragmentation) are notorious tools. Another constitutive element for its importance in filmmaking is editing. Mekas takes his time to edit his films. He needs to have a particular perspective to work with the filmed material. Making Diary Films implies taking care of oneself as part of the work. "making diary films was a way to remember and make sense of his life from a distance; hence, he

⁹ James, "Reminiscences, Subjectivities and Truths," 154.

¹⁰ Mekas, *The Diary Film*, 193.

¹¹ Hart, *Extensions of Our Body Moving, Dancing: The American Avant-Garde's Theories of Handheld Subjectivity*, 43.

would edit his films years after filming. By editing the footage much later, he was able to get into “the right perspective” and gain the necessary distance to see “life itself”¹². An exciting example of the montage can be seen in the sequence of the visit to Stan Brakhage's house in the country. In a fragment of about twelve minutes, we gain access to the life of his filmmaker friend. The situations are diverse: the train ride, children playing in the snow, horses, the forest, family breakfast, children coming home from school, Jonas Mekas on a miniature donkey being filmed by the children, and so on. In the background sounds the accordion that Mekas plays. His presence in this world is not only with the camera but through the sound editing with music that he puts in post-production. The visit lasts a few days and records the harmonious country life of a family. At one particular moment, Brakhage travels to the nearby town, and an intertitle mentions it, STAN GOES TO TOWN. The sound of the accordion continues, then suddenly stops, and orchestral music takes place. This music accompanies us on the trip to the village. It is not until the filmmakers return that the intertitle STAN LISTENS TO LILI BOULANGER appears, after which we see Brakhage playing with his dog in his bed while the snow falls outside. This editing work is meticulous and intends to show us his characters from their interiority and ways of life. It is a sequence in which, through the montage, Mekas manages to make us enter a world he knows, where he has been invited and makes us participants in that invitation. The montage of images and sound marks the closeness that the sequence transmits. The sound work is the exclusive territory of the editing. It should be remembered that the camera with which Mekas shot, a 16mm Bolex, is a camera that does not allow the recording of ambient sound. In addition, the Bolex is a non-synchronous camera that makes noise, so all sound must be added in post-production.

¹² Jasinskaite, *Aesthetic Puzzlements: Jonas Mekas's Diary Films and Ludwig Wittgenstein*. 180.

One element in *Walden* occupies a notorious relevance: the inclusion of intertitles that occupy the entire screen and appear from time to time throughout the film. These texts have a few uses: marking Mekas's relationships with the names of friends and events, WENDY'S WEDDING, MEL'S CHILDREN, A VISIT TO HANS RICHTER or AT TABOR FARM LITHUANIANS DANCED TILL SUNRISE, MARTHA WHOM I HADN'T SEEN FOR SOME TIME. Another use is the passing of seasons or specific times, WINTER SCENE, SOON AFTER THAT CAME AUTUMN, CHRISTMAS EVE, SEVEN YEARS AGO, NEXT MORNING, or places such as ON THIRD AVENUE, A GIRL WAITING FOR SPRING, AT RUTGERS. Finally, a couple of times, I THOUGHT OF HOME appears.

Using intertitles responds to a sense of appreciation. Some things have different meanings for Mekas. Despite being in a Diary Film, where chronology is supposedly essential, in the case of *Walden*, what prevails in this resource is the author's value to the filmed event. The intertitles are anchors of meaning for highly free and often stunning audiovisual material. However, they are also an approach to a complex subjectivity since the film does not propose to us transparently enter the NY-Mekas-Everyday Life world. Times overlap, and causes and effects do not exist. This subjectivity "is dispersed across multiple layers -- filming, voiceover, inter-titles and narrative structure -- so the representation of subjectivity is fluid."¹³ Mekas' subjectivity is thus unstable, waiting to be defined, adrift, and in constant flux. The particularity of this proposal is how a resource that in the original cinema (silent films) was used so that the viewer would not get lost in the narrative, in *Walden* becomes the access to the priorities of a filmmaker in front of his world and its occupants.

Another resource of the film that, like the intertitles, contains a sort of "declaration of principles" is voice-over narration. Mekas is Lithuanian, and his English voice carries his

¹³ Smith, *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mekas*, 48.

foreign accent noticeably, but it is not only how the words sound but also a descriptive and poetic intonation. There are eight voice-over fragments in the play. In some of them, Mekas' voice is heard next to the keyboard of a typewriter. Again, it is cinema as writing. The resource is simple but powerful: listening to the typewriter, we access the present tense construction of the ideas we are listening to, as if they were expressed automatically, intuitively and without a building before their pronunciation. The first fragment is brief but concise: " I live, therefore I make films. I make film, therefore I live. Life. Movement. I make home movies, therefore I live. I live, therefore I make home movies."¹⁴ In the second fragment, he proposes that we accept silence and listening (the text is *Saint John of the cross-Grenada-November 22, 1587*), a second narration expresses his unease at the indolence of passers-by in the face of a group of women demonstrating in the street in New York on a freezing winter's day. The third moment is a reflection on the act of dreaming. The fourth, fifth and sixth are reflections on the simplicity of underground cinema dedicated to filming life and every day without fuss or complications. A cinema far removed from drama and tragedy. Mekas asks us to look and let ourselves be carried away by this cinema. In the fifth text, which is quite long, Mekas describes a trip to New Jersey with a group of underground filmmakers filmed by a German television crew reporting on this artistic movement. Mekas pokes a little fun at the channel's intention to film underground filmmakers in action who are filming dramatic and necessary social situations. Mekas's narration is a break from what we see. It opposes what the images tell. The sixth text continues the previous one and is where Mekas finally decides to expose what cinema is for him.: "(...) and then I got tired of it all and I started shooting just for myself . That's what cinema is single frames, frames, cinema is between the frames. Cinema is light, movement, the sun, light, a heart beating, breathing, light, frames. In the background, those are the steps of the filmmaker as he walks the city day

¹⁴ Mekas, *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)*

and night, day and night. In the background the music of the people. In the background those are the voices of the children of the people. In the foreground, those are the cameras of the filmmakers. In the background you begin to hear another music coming in. Mozart. And as the music of gods and the cameras of the filmmakers begin to mix"¹⁵

His voice, which is constantly accompanied by the typewriter, is used to clarify what cinema, which the film over more than two hours, has tried to express with fragmentations in camera, double exposures, sound freedom and intertitles. Cinema in its essential sense. The seventh and last fragment of narration appears after the title A FLASHBACK: SEVEN YEARS AGO. This title appeared previously at the twenty-fourth minute when it described the women demonstrating in the street in the winter. On this second occasion, the images of the event reappear (they are in black and white), but there are more details, and the editing is different, as well as the text. Despite being in the same situation, having the same intertitle, and using voice-over, the feeling we are left with is different. Mekas says: "backs, peace, energy. I remember that early morning one sunday. They were there in front of the United Nations building, their rucksacks full of leaflets. It was snowing, it was freezing and nobody was there I don't know where the city was. I don't know where anybody was; sleeping or the churches. But the backs were there walking for peace. It was cold. It was snowing. It was freezing. They were so lonely and lost"¹⁶ The text at minute twenty-four reads instead: "I think it was just before christmas, they stood there, they stood there. It was cold. It was coldest day of the year. They stood there, the women for peace. I stood on the corner of 42nd street and I watched them. There were people passing by hurriedly. Nobody stopped. They were passing by."¹⁷. The two texts are complementary and are used to give a sense of memory and recollection. Eventually, we always remember things differently.

¹⁵ Mekas, *Walden (Diaries, Notes and Sketches)*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

The idea of memory circulates throughout the film without its main objective is to understand this human element. When the intertitle I THOUGHT OF HOME appears, what we see next are images of Jonas Mekas occupying the frame. The filmmaker sets his camera to film him (or someone else operates it), and the frame is no longer charged with the filmmaker's subjectivity. Still, the cinema has shifted to see the creator from a particular perspective. His image in the film is always an image that he records when he is behind the camera. "The representation of the self is very different from the "I" of language. Mekas is mainly behind the camera, so his physical presence is usually represented through shadows or reflections."¹⁸ In this case, the intention to maintain a perspective is notorious. Mekas is then shown as the foreigner who records his life in New York as much as he can, but sometimes his mental and emotional state pertains to his native Lithuania. "It would be too simple to say that the imagery of nature in his work represents "Lithuania" (past) while all the people and activities he films document "America" (present). The fragmentary presentation of his life acknowledges that the representation is incomplete and that a present moment activity will ultimately become past."¹⁹ As he mentions: "I kept coming back to the same subjects, the same images or image sources, which included snow, trees and flowers."²⁰ In other films, this theme will be the main one, for example, "*Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*" (1971-72) and "*Lost, Lost, Lost*" (1976).

Although Mekas's commitment to expressing his subjectivity is clear, and the resources he uses are numerous, it is not true that *Walden* and other Mekas films are sufficient elements to know the person in his totality. The aesthetics of subjectivity is an approach to the Mekas phenomenon with more gaps than clarities. This self-representation, which takes this film into a self-portraiture territory, is fragmented and incomplete. "The

¹⁸ Smith. *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mekas*, 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 69.

²⁰ Mekas, *The Diary Film*, 61.

representation of the self is largely dependent on absence and metaphor.”²¹. Thus, we discover the creator of the work and the film, which, although complex and clear about its author and his priorities, gives us back a contemporary self with contradictions, full of biases and notoriously incomplete, a filmmaker with a boiling creative energy that “would equate his practice not only with dance but also with jazz, method acting, abstract expression-ist painting, and beat writing practices—practices that privileged spontaneity and improvisation at the moment of creation”²².

To assign the category of self-portrait to Mekas' films would be to view his work too openly: “a broad and flexible approach to the genre would suggest considering all first person, autobiographical films which involve selfrepresentation (diaries, travelogues, notebooks, letters, poems and autobiographical documentaries) as instances of selfportraiture”²³. Mekas' cinema is so different and full of particularities that it cannot be easily categorized. *Walden* is an extensive compendium of the technical and creative resources of a filmmaker who undertook a very profound work of political, conceptual and subjective creation. The work goes beyond the self-portrait, and the self-representation of its creator is full of doubts rather than certainties.

Mekas' camera is a tool for reading the world that revalues everyday life and proposes a new cinema without ties. A free cinema. The conventional cinematographic image bets on transparency (at least in fiction films) and tries as far as possible not to make the spectator uncomfortable. It is a tool for transmitting content that does not assume itself to be the creator of content. Films are read based on their formal proposal, so this premise is not supported. However, we are used to accepting that what is important is what is shown rather than how it is shown. The film industry created this paradigm from its inception, and independent cinema

²¹ Smith. *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mekas*, 55.

²² Hart, *Extensions of Our Body Moving, Dancing: The American Avant-Garde's Theories of Handheld Subjectivity*, 43

²³ Lebow, *The Cinema of me, the self and subjectivity in first person documentary*, 82.

has struggled more than once to free itself from this constraint. Mekas is exemplary because his work finally begins a new cinema. A new medium where intuition and imperfection are elements that give value to the work and not the opposite. To accept these particularities of the film camera is to assume that filmmaking is to bet on liberation of the camera to allow cinema as art a possibility of growth. The "error" of the camera movement in Mekas' filmography is the gesture of a new medium that has been able to free itself. William Kentridge, in his filmic work, is clear about this: "the shakiness of the camera—all produce a film that has a very specific nature and for which I have to take responsibility, but which was not consciously, deliberately, or rationally planned"²⁴. His reflection on the creative act suggests that at certain moments of his practice, he had access to a "sensation was more of discovery than invention. There was no feeling of what a good idea I had had; rather, relief at not having overlooked what was in front of me, and a sense of being really stupid not to have realized earlier what had to happen"²⁵, or "I am not claiming the moment or image as a particularly potent one, but what does fascinate me is to know where that image came from. It was not planned. I could not have predicted it at the start of the day. It was not an answer to a question I had posed myself"²⁶. Kentridge, filmmaker and animator artist, is one example among many who, dedicated to the world of fiction, find a profound way of creation in automatic and intuitive practices.

To free cinema from its industrial ties is to allow it to grow as a medium. It is a medium distinct from narrative cinema that must be able to find its momentum of automatism. In the words of Rosalind Krauss: "An artistic automatism is the discovery of a form—call it a convention—that will generate a continuing set of new instances, spinning them out the way a language does; further, it recognizes the need to take chances in the face

²⁴ Kentridge, *Fortuna: Neither Program nor Chance in the Making of Images*. 27

²⁵ *Ibid.*30

²⁶ *Ibid.*30

of a medium now cut free from the guarantees of artistic tradition. Finally it implies the way in which the work so created is ‘autonomous,’ liberated from its maker”.²⁷

These new instances of the new cinema are a path that always felt like a possibility. So it is in amateur cinema, in family film, in the instantaneous recordings made possible by contemporary devices, in avant-garde cinema, in some video clips, and in particular practices of social networks. It is in what can be called “imperfection”, a political attitude. “Imperfect cinema struggles to overcome the division of labour in class society. It fuses art with life and science, blurring the distinction between those who consume and those who produce between the audience and the author. It insists on its imperfection, it is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic.”²⁸

In all these new forms, all far away from the big screen, cinema frees itself, seeks to show the medium's capacity where the creator (filmmaker, artist, tiktokker or youtuber) offers his subjectivity with mechanisms similar to those proposed by Mexas half a century ago. The word CINEMA then mutated. It was created at the end of the nineteenth century, consolidated in the first half of the last century, and transformed into AUDIOVISUAL in the nineties, into NEW MEDIA in the twenty-first century. It still hopes to continue mutating or, at best, to return to its origins.

Mexas opens *Walden* with a dedication to the Lumieres, this. “re-emphasizes cinema’s origins in the representation of daily life, as Louis and Auguste Lumière’s films depicted events such as a train entering a station, street scenes, workers leaving a factory and a baby eating breakfast, but these type of simple events were sidelined by fiction and narrative.”²⁹. Mexas had it clear from the beginning: cinema has within itself everything it needs to return to its origins.

²⁷ Krauss, “*The Rock*”: *William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection*”. 41

²⁸ Steyerl, *Los condenados de la pantalla*, 41

²⁹ Smith, *The representation of subjectivity in the Diary Films of Jonas Mexas*, 56.

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IMAGES



DIARIES
notes and
sketches

also known
as
WALDEN

IN NEW YORK
WAS STILL
WINTER





BUT THE WIND
WAS
FULL OF
SPRING



I cut my hair,
to raise money.
Having teas
with rich
ladies.

0.45 Tolo
0.42 Foo
0.20 na

SUNDAY
AT STONES





MARIE
MENKEN
& SISTER

